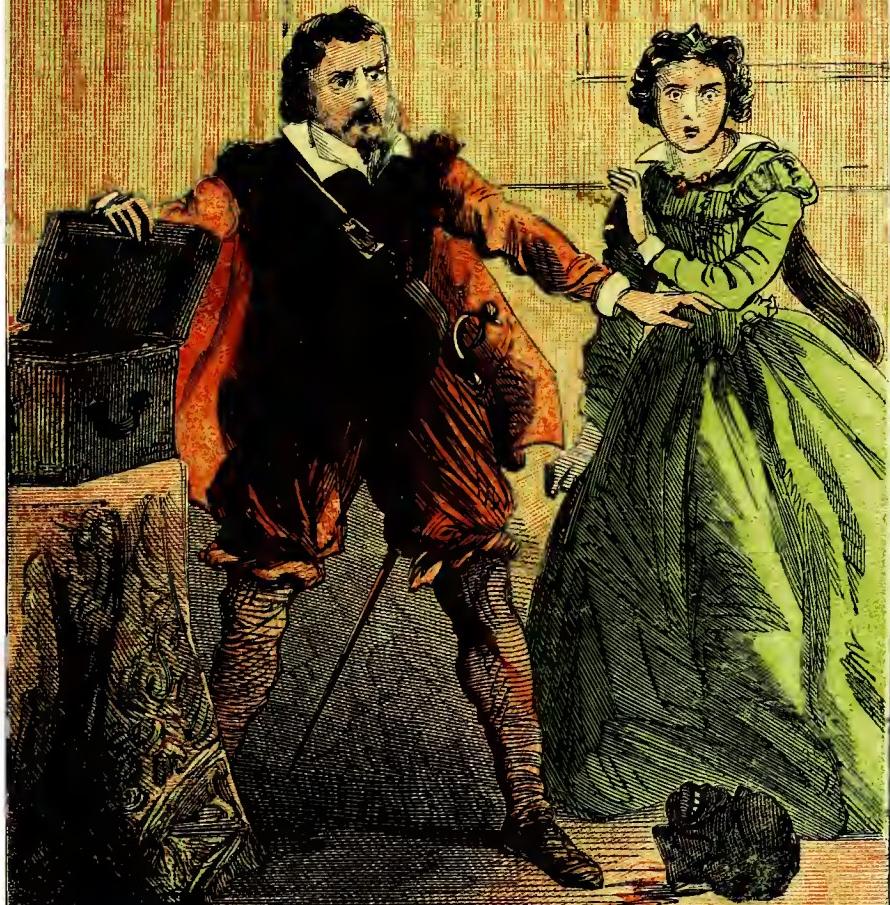


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opportunity of making known to all my friends the excellency and virtue of your most powerful specific. I think it is incumbent on you, and a duty you owe to the public at large, to let them know by all means in your power the wonderful health-restoring remedy for all ailments you possess.—With many thanks for the service you have been to me, yours faithfully,

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H. J. FRIZENALD.

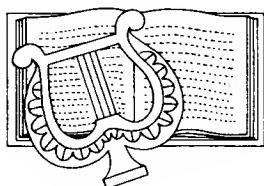
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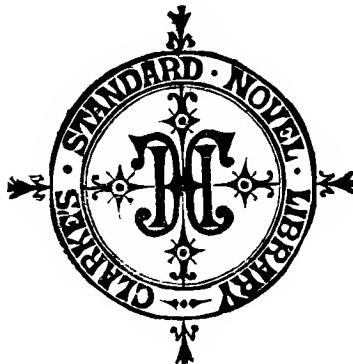
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THE BEAUTIFUL DEMON.

THE
BEAUTIFUL DEMON

BY THE AUTHOR OF

SKITTLES—LEFT HER HOME—ANNIE—DELILAH—KATE HAMILTON—
AGNES WILLOUGHBY—THE SOILED DOVE—SKITTLES IN PARIS—
LOVE FROLICS OF A YOUNG SCAMP—ANONYMA—INCognita
—FORMOSA—THE LADY DETECTIVE.



LONDON: CHARLES HENRY CLARKE,
7 GOUGH SQUARE, FLEET STREET.

PREFACE.

LEST there should be any misconception as to the pretensions of this volume, the Author wishes to say that it is founded on a French romance ; but though the main scheme of the plot has been adopted and followed, the action and the dialogue are original. Several new characters are introduced, and the story is worked out in a manner totally different from that of the romance which furnished the idea. Many episodes, scenes, and dialogues in the French work are at variance with English notions. These, of course, have been wholly avoided. The first chapter, and the climax in the last but one of this work, nearly resemble those in the French romance. Nevertheless, all the action in the body of the book, and the events leading up to the catastrophe, are now printed for the first time ; and if the tale affords amusement and interest, the object of its publication will have been attained.

W. S. H.

London, October 186

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THE BEAUTIFUL DEMON

Prologue.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMBAT OPPOSITE THE BALCONY OF LUCRECIA.

IN the suburbs of the Italian town Spoleto, which is situated near the foot of the mountain-ranges of the Apennines and the Abruzzi, there stood a charming little residence — half palace, half villa ; and in that charming residence resided a celebrated young beauty, who, however, if report spoke truly, was not as chaste as fair. She numbered scarce eighteen summers, was beautiful, vivacious, witty. Bright sparkling eyes and a sunny smile had the “Lucreccia Mammona,” for so was she called by the gallants of Spoleto, many of whom were her devoted admirers.

Scandal whispred, among other things, that the gay young beauty was, in truth, the favoured mistress of Hercules Vitelli, Count of Spoleto, Prince of Monte Leone, and Earl of Ascoli. This noble was

at that time among the wealthiest, if not the most powerful, in all Italy. He had a stately palace in Spoleto, another at Capua, a third at Naples, and more than twenty castles scattered about on the fertile Italiau plains at the foot of the mountains.

But though, nominally at least, the prince was lord of the plains, he was not practically so ; and in the mountains he had his master. For in the rocky fastnesses of the Abruzzi there dwelt a chief, half brigand, half free-lancee, who had sworn an eternal *vendetta* against him. He was called Andrea Vitelli, and was a cousin of his enemy the prince.

This Andrea Vitelli had under his command a numerous and warlike band ; indeed, he ruled with absolute sway a kingdom of his own ; for there were small towns and villages in the mountains, built in naturally strong positions ; and besides these, more than one strong fortress, which defied all the power and might of the lord of the plains.

It was known that the prince was in mortal terror of his fiercee, warlike, bandit relative ; and therefore, perhaps, it was that, though the richest and most beautiful of his possessions lay in the neighbourhood of Spoleto, he but seldom visited either his *châteaux* in the plain or his palace in the city, and then only accompanied by a powerful guard.

At the time of which we now speak, the Prince of Monte Leone had, after an absence of several years, paid a visit to his town of Spoleto, bring-

ing with him a body of armed men, his wife, his infant daughter, and also the fair young lady known as Lucrecia Mammona.

Of this latter nothing more was known than that she had been brought up by the prince, and was said to be a distant relative.

But though nothing was known for a certainty, rumour, with her hundred tongues, was busy ; and it was universally believed that the charming damsel was the mistress of the great noble. Nay more, it was asserted that within the palace-walls there was another infant besides that of the prince's wife, and that other was said to belong to Lucrecia Mammona. Be that as it may, it was certain that the delightful little villa she occupied belonged to him, and that he frequently visited its fair occupant.

The Prince of Monte Leone was a man of haughty and imperious temper, and not one that on such a point would trouble to think on the outraged feelings of his wife ; and the gossips of the town, knowing this and much more of his character, readily accepted the tale as truth.

Now let us return to the little villa in the outskirts of the town, charmingly perched on the high bank of the river Nera, which took its rise in the neighbouring mountains, and flowed past the town.

The villa was surrounded on all sides by a balcony, as was usual in Italian residences of the superior class ; but one side of this balcony actually

hung over the stream, which, though narrow, was rapid and deep.

The opposite face of this balcony projected over the roadway. The jalousies, or green blinds, on this side were all down. Occasionally, however, it might have been observed that one of these blinds was cautiously raised a foot or so, and then the light of the room gave a glimpse of a charming face peering out. Presently a delicate little hand is protruded, and a small object falls with a slight jingle on the pavement.

Instantly a young man darts out from the shadow of a portico on the opposite side, and seizing the key, first kisses it rapturously, and then hastening to the door under the balcony, inserts it in the key-hole, enters, and disappears ; the door closing behind him.

Almost at the same moment three other men appear in sight, and, coming from different directions, approach the same villa.

All three walk with a sort of swagger, and are magnificently attired ; indeed, any one seeing them could not fail to remark the absurd splendour of their dress, and if he knew any thing of the habits of the nobles and gentry of the period, would not fail to pronounce all three either as *bourgeois* or *parvenus*.

The three men, doubtless rapt in their own thoughts, did not appear to see each other, although the night was not dark.

They all three walked straight to the villa of

Lucrecia Mammona, and halted at short distances from each other, opposite the window from which the key had fallen.

The villa, as we have said, was a charming one. However, the three richly-attired gentlemen took little heed of its beauties of sculpture and adornment, but each gazed steadily at the scrupulously closed jalousie whence had fallen the key.

This curiosity certainly was somewhat marvellous, inasmuch as, though within a few paces of each other, every one appeared to believe himself alone.

Presently the blind is raised a few feet, and the same charming head appears.

For a moment only; for, frightened apparently by the sight of three men waiting beneath, the lady quickly lets it fall again.

At this, each of the three turned, and gave vent to an expression of disappointment and chagrin ; and then it was that each appeared to see with surprise the presence of the others waiting beneath the same window.

“ Ah ! ” cried one, “ if I do not mistake, I see the Signor Contarini.”

“ And what brings the Signors Fanferluzzi and Capitano here ? It wants but two hours of midnight.”

“ This is indeed a marvellous *rencontre*, ” said he who had been called Contarini.

“ Marvellous, indeed — quite amusing, ” replied Capitano, forcing a laugh.

"Really this is very fortunate—very singular for friends to meet thus unexpectedly," said Fanferluzzi, who nevertheless looked far from pleased.

The fact is, that each of the three would have been better satisfied to have seen the others far enough away at that particular time.

After a few more words, each of the three turned, and saluting the others, walked off hastily, as if going their way. But, singular to relate, in less than five minutes' time all three of our friends again met beneath the balcony of Lucrecia Mammona.

"*Peste!*" growled Capitano; "this is more than singular; it is an impertinence."

And as he spoke, he twirled his large moustache, drew up his big, warlike figure, caused his heavy sabre to rattle on the pavement, and altogether looked very ferocious.

"'Tis strange, very strange," muttered Fanferluzzi, the exquisite, trifling delicately with his pretty toy of a rapier, "that we threc should thus meet. I propose, since all seem bent on the same errand, that we draw lots who shall remain."

"Devil take your drawing lots, Signor Fanferluzzi!" growled Capitano. "Do you not know there is a *fête* at the palace of the prince to-night, and that the Signora Marie d'Amalfi will be there? Surely the gay, gallant, and fascinating Fanferluzzi will not fail to pay his homage to the fair lady?"

"And you, Signor Contarini, do you not know

there is a grand supper at the Hôtel Salvator ? The viands are of the best, and the wine—but who is so good a judge of wines and viands as the Signor Contarini ? What need to say more ?”

While Capitano was speaking, an addition was made to their party.

A tall man, mounted on a black horse, rode up, and halting, listened for a while to their conversation. While so doing, his keen eye noticed the jalouse again cautiously raised, and the same fair head appear for a moment, when again the blind was lowered.

At once the stranger seemed to comprehend the situation.

With a reckless, scornful laugh, he threw himself from his horse, and fastened the bridle to an iron hook at the corner of the street, placed there for the purpose.

Then he advanced towards the three, still wrangling in the road.

“ Come, come, my gentlemen ! what is all this ? three of you wrangling and disputing under the balcony of one fair lady ? We from the mountains have a very short way of settling these affairs.”

“ And what may that be, sir ? and who may you be who thus intrude your conversation upon strangers ?” said Capitano, with well-affected scorn.

“ As to who I am, that is my business, you with the big moustache. As to the mode of settling disputes of this kind, it is this : there are four

of us ; let us range ourselves two on a side, then one couple will kill or disable the other couple. I, for my part, will engage to spit you through the body, sir, if it be my fortune to cross swords with you."

"Indeed!" sneered the other, "a very pretty thing! but you forget, you from the mountains, that there would still be two left."

"*Peste!*" replied the other, laughing; "I will soon dispose of that difficulty by killing or driving off the survivor."

He spoke in a gay, reckless tone of voice, as though he were laughing at the three gallants.

"Come, gentlemen, what do you say? Let us settle this business. 'Twill be quite a charming little adventure. It is soon over. Such gallant gentlemen need not be reminded that a rapier-thrust is a very trifling thing."

"Ah, yes, of course, a rapier-thrust is nothing," murmured Fanferluzzi; "but it seems to me very ridiculous to engage in a quarrel on such grounds for a woman, even though that woman be Luerecia Mammona."

No sooner were the words uttered, than a total change came over the stranger. He turned very pale, and his eyes gleamed like live coals from beneath the broad-brimmed hat he wore.

He threw off his cloak and hat, and instantly drawing his sword, stood before the astonished trio in an attitude as if about to attack. Hitherto his

form and features had been concealed by the cloak and slouched hat he wore. Now they saw before them a tall, broad-shouldered young man, of about five or six and twenty. His frame was built for strength and agility. There was not an ounce of fat on his large, strong bones—all was muscle and sinew; and though they were three, his attitude and appearance by no means pleased our friends. In face he was swarthy and handsome, wearing a small black moustache, without beard.

“Come, come, poltroons! draw and fight, or vanish; for since this is the house of Lucrezia Mammona, I, and I only, shall stay outside or enter.”

“Come! do you hear me?” and he stamped his foot angrily; “or I will run you through as you stand.”

Still the three seemed inclined rather to parley than fight, though at the same time unwilling to give up possession of the field to one man.

“Perdition, you hounds!” shouted the stranger, who now seemed wild with fury, “you will neither fight nor fly: we shall see.”

And then he struck Contarini a blow over the head with the flat of his weapon, turned quickly on Fanferluzzi, whom he pricked with the point, and then advanced towards the fire-eating Capitano, who, far from seeking the encounter, withdrew to a safe distance. The other two, however, enraged at the blow and the sword-prick, drew and rushed on him.

With the utmost skill and coolness, the stranger met the attack, not only warding off the thrusts of both swords, but dealing furious and dangerous blows in return.

Unequal as the conflict seemed, he had already drawn blood from both without having himself been wounded, and was pressing them hard, all the while hurling taunts and insults in their teeth. At this juncture, Capitano, seeing his companions likely to be worsted, also drew his sword, and making a circuit, prepared to attack the redoubtable stranger in flank.

“Peste!” he muttered, “‘tis a devil of a fellow; but neither he nor Satan himself can withstand three at once.”

And consoling himself with this thought, he joined in the fight. The stranger then was hard pressed, for three to one was terrible odds. Seeing his danger from the thrusts of Capitano, who attacked him on the right side while he battled with the two in front, he retreated till he stood between the two pillars of the portico, thus compelling his adversaries to come in front.

This did not at all please the gallant Capitano, who, seeing the other two bleeding from the thrusts of the stranger’s terrible sword, and panting from the exertion, wisely kept as far out of reach as possible, more especially as Fanferluzzi and Contarini, being evidently winded, now demanded less of the stranger’s attention. Their thrusts being feeble, and

delivered with bad aim, he was now enabled to attack Capitano in turn.

But this worthy, not caring to encounter so terrible an antagonist single-handed, drew back, compelling his adversary to advance some paces forward. The others, having now somewhat recovered their wind, again took heart, and one, by a quick thrust, slightly wounded him in the arm.

The single swordsman turned fiercely on Contarini, who had given this thrust, and bounded towards him with a cry of fury, and with such desperate energy, that the gallant gentleman turned and absolutely fled.

At the same moment the door of the villa beneath the portico opened softly, and a young man came out, the door closing noiselessly behind him.

After a rapid glance around, he appeared to understand the situation, and drawing his sword, prepared to attack Fanferluzzi.

“What! two men to one! Shame! Have at them, brave sir! Doubtless some drunken *bourgeois*, who know better the prices of cheese and butter than the laws of honour.”

Maddened at this taunt, Fanferluzzi made a momentary stand; but finding at once that his new adversary was younger, stronger, and more skilful than himself, he followed the example of Contarini, and fairly took to flight.

Capitano had before done so, wisely arguing

that if three could not conquer one, two would have a very poor chance with two.

The young man who had issued from the house and the stranger were now left alone together.

" You are not hurt, signor ?" asked the former.

" No, not even touched. *Peste !* if the cowardly knaves had only stood their ground, I would have made short work of them. Many thanks, signor, for your assistance."

" Oh, that is nothing," replied the other lightly. "'Tis, as you say, a pity the fellows had not stood ; such cowardly knaves deserve to have their noses slit. Adieu, signor."

" Adieu."

The next moment the stranger was alone. He sheathed his sword, repossessed himself of his hat and cloak, and thundered loudly at the door of the villa. He pushed roughly past the servant who opened to him, saying abruptly :

" Lucrecia Mammona—I must see her."

Then he strode swiftly up the stairs, his sword clashing and banging on each step as he ascended.

CHAPTER II.

HERCULES VITELLI.

" I HAVE seen him ! I have seen him ! Merciful Heaven, he is here in Spoleto !"

"Who is here? Idiot, whom have you seen?" said Hercules Vitelli, Count of Monte Leone, scowling angrily on the woman, who, rushing into his presence, thus abruptly addressed him.

The woman appeared about forty years of age, and had remnants of beauty left which even age could not entirely obliterate. She held the position in the household of the prince, nominally, as *duenna*, or nurse, to the two infants then calmly sleeping in another chamber of the palace. But all knew that really the woman Mercedes had great influence with the lord of Spoleto; so much so, that though they had frequent quarrels and violent scenes, in which she was unsparing in insolence and abuse, the prince, though frequently urged by his wife to dismiss her, always refused to do so.

People said that Mercedes was in possession of secrets which the prince could not afford to have bruited abroad; some even went so far as to say that he and she had been concerned in some great crime, and that he could not quarrel with her finally.

The prince himself was a man of some five-and-forty years, of stormy and saturnine countenance, and fierce and cruel temper.

"Come, fool, speak!" he thundered, stamping his foot. "Whom have you seen?"

"Him—him—your enemy! our enemy!" the woman gasped.

"Ah! Andrea Vitelli—Demonio!"

"Demonio!" murmured the woman, gazing round in a terrified manner.

"You have seen him?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And spoken to him?"

"Yes."

"What did he say?"

"He demanded of me his sister—where she was."

"You did not tell him?" almost shouted the Prince.

The woman was silent.

"May curses light on your head, you fool!" he roared. "You idiot, you have ruined me!"

"Hercules Vitelli, curses have fallen on my head—the curse of an uneasy conscience—the curse of a constant demon gnawing at the heart. And you—you, Prince de Monte Leone—you are the cause. Murderer, you reproach me with being weak enough to tell him all, when his strong grasp held me, and his dagger was at my throat. Do you remember once before, Hercules Vitelli, when I yielded to threats, and you were the threatener? Do you remember what was the cause of those threats? Do you remember that you threatened me with death if I would not be an accomplice in your crime? Do you remember years ago, in this very room? I hear now the groans and prayers of our victim. I hear them—I hear them always! I see his glaring eyes."

"Peace, Mercedes!" shouted the prince, ghastly white, and with the perspiration streaming down his face. "Calm yourself. Tell me what has happened. We both are in peril, if he is in Spoleto."

By degrees the woman recovered from her excitement. "This evening I met Andrea Vitelli in a lonely suburb of Spoleto. He at once recognised me, seized me, and compelled me to tell him of Lis sister. I dared not trifle with him; there was death in those terrible eyes of his."

"And you told him all?"

"I told him all."

"That his sister was called Lucrecia Mammona?"

"Yes."

"And that her child was in this palace?"

"Yes."

The prince was silent for some time, and then said in a low voice :

"Send hither Capitano. Find him, wherever he be."

"Capitano is below. He is bragging to the officer of the guard of some brawl, in which he this night defeated three adversaries single-handed."

"Send him here," said the prince moodily.

In five minutes Capitano was in the presence of his powerful patron.

"Capitano, I have always found you trustworthy."

"Thanks, my lord."

"I have work for you."

Capitano bowed.

“How many of your fellows can you collect at oncee ?”

“A score in ten minutes. The rest I cannot answer for; they are drinking about the town.”

“Good. Do you know that *he* is in Spoleto ?”

“Who, my lord ?”

“Demonio.”

“Andrea Vitelli, the bandit-chief ?”

“The same.”

Capitano turned slightly pale.

“Has he any with him ?”

“No, none ; he is alone.”

“Ah !”

“Mercedes has seen him. He must not leave Spoleto alive. Do you understand ?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“It must be done silently and swiftly.”

“But I do not know him.”

“You cannot fail to recognise him, if you see him. He is tall and swarthy, with a small black moustache, and rode a black horse when Mercedes met him.”

“Ha ! And has he also a large cloak with silver clasp and buttons, a long sword, and a broad-brimmed hat ?”

“Exactly. You have seen him, then ?” said the prince eagerly.

“Yes, such a man as you describe, by the Hôtel Salvator.”

"Well, see you find him, and give me a good account. Dead or alive, a thousand ducats!"

"You may consider it done, prince."

"I advise you not to attack him single-handed, Capitano. He is a desperate swordsman."

Capitano mentally resolved that nothing should tempt him to such imprudence; and, bowing, retired to collect his bullies and bravos.

"The children, Mercedes?" said the prince, when they were again alone; "are they well and safe?"

"Alma is well; but Regina is delicate and ailing. They are now both asleep."

"Ah!" he said testily, "it is always Alma, Alma who is well—Alma, the child of shame, of Lucrecia Mammona; whilst my Regina, my lawful heiress, is for ever ailing. Heaven send that she may be sparc'd to me! Mercedes, you are sure they are safe? for, remember, Demonio is in Spoleto."

"What need for alarm? They are in the room in the eastern turret; and to reach it, it is necessary to pass through the courtyard, and vestibule, and dining-hall—unless, indeed, one could take wings and fly; and even Andrea Vitelli cannot do that."

CHAPTER III.

LUCRECIA MAMMONA.

LUCRECIA MAMMONA was standing before the mirror in the saloon on the first-floor of the villa, arranging a circlet of pearls in her luxuriant hair. She was attired for a ball or *fête*, and was only awaiting the carriage to take her. Her charming figure was encased in a tight-fitting satin body in the Neapolitan style, her beautiful shoulders and arms bare; while more of her bust was uncovered than was usual in those days. Her figure was supple and rounded, and as well-developed as that of a woman of two or three and twenty, although Lucrecia was barely seventeen. The quick, loud step of the stranger on the stairs caused her to turn and look with astonishment at the door, where she saw standing a tall man, in a large cloak and slouched hat, from beneath the brim of which a pair of piercing eyes earnestly regarded her.

A cry of astonishment and fear escaped the young girl.

“Lucrecia Mammona,” he said in stern, solemn tones, “look at me.”

“Sir,” she faltered, “who are you? I do not know you. What do you require?”

The stranger did not reply, but continued to regard her sorrowfully.

"What does this mean, sir?" she said somewhat angrily. "What reason is there that I should not call my servants, and order them to turn you out?"

"Look at me again, Lucrecia Mammona," said the unknown, removing his hat.

She saw the features of a bronzed and handsome young man, of some twenty five or six years.

She gazed long and earnestly, a vague sentiment of wonder and foreboding possessing her; and she presently said, not angrily, but rather timidly:

"Sir, I have looked, and, I repeat, have never seen you before."

He strode up to her, and placing one hand on her shoulder, said:

"You do not know me, Lucrecia? Nevertheless, I am your brother."

A cry of astonishment burst from her lips.

"Brother! I knew not I had a brother."

"Nevertheless, I am he; and my name is Andrea Vitelli."

This time a little shriek burst from the girl's lips.

"Andrea Vitelli! Demonio! The bandit! Ah! holy saints, protect me!"

"Silence!" he said sternly. "Come out with me on to the balcony; we may be overheard here."

Then taking her hand, he led her unresistingly out on to the balcony, which overhung the river.

He pointed to a long, low seat, and, in obedience to the gesture, she seated herself, while he took a place beside her.

A dim, shadowy terror pervaded her whole soul ; she felt that she could not disobey this man, who spoke so calmly and gently, but withal so commandingily.

He remained silent for a short spacee, gazing out at the distant mountains, as though in deep thought.

"My brother !" she murmured, looking up in his handsome facee, in which the moon's pale beams shone. "Ah, I know ; I feel you speak the truth. How I shall love you, though you are a bandit !"

"I have always loved you, Lucrecia," he said sadly; "I have long looked forward to the day I should meet you ; and now, when, after an absence of fourteen years, I peril my life to regain my sister—now, this very day — what do I hear ? God ! it makes my blood boil !"

He started to his feet, and commenced pacing up and down the balcony.

Suddenly he stopped opposite her.

"Listen !" he said : "they call you Luerecia Mammona ; I am Andrea Vitelli, Prince of Monte Leone, Lord of Ascoli, Count of Spoleto ; and you—you are the Countess Luercia Vitelli. Do you comprehend ?"

"Heavens, is it possible ?" she cried : "and the prince—who, then, is he ?"

"I am the prince, I tell you," he said sternly.

"Who, then, is he in the palace ?"

"An usurper, a traitor, and a murderer ; such is our cousin, Hercules Vitelli."

"A murderer!"

"Yes, Lucrecia, a murderer—the murderer of our father."

The girl hid her face in her hands, and sobbed bitterly; while Andrea went on speaking in harsh, stern tones, which went to her heart like daggers.

"For years I have not seen you, Lucrecia. For fourteen years I have looked forward to the day when I could clasp my sister in my arms: that day has come; but I cannot embrace you."

"Oh, brother, mercy! I am alone in the world."

"Lucrecia Vitelli, I cannot embrace you, sister though you be, till you answer what I require of you. This day I lay in wait for the duenna Mercedes, in whose charge you were in infancy. I seized her, and, at the peril of her life, forced her to tell me where my sister was. She told me that she was called Lucrecia Mammona; and then, satisfied that she spoke truth, I let her go. Then I strolled into the town, and loitered about the hotels and wine-shops to hear the gossip. What was it I heard? I will tell you. I heard men speak of Lucrecia Mammona; I heard them praise her wit, her beauty, her grace. I heard all this, and I heard more. Men said that this Lucrecia Mammona had soiled her fair fame—had sold her honour—had disgraced the name of our father; and that, finally, she was the mistress of that father's murderer. All this I heard, Lucrecia; and then I hurried here to listen to your denial. Speak, sister; say this is not true."

But the girl only sobbed, and moaned piteously.

Andrea Vitelli stood sternly looking on her, with folded arms, a terrible frown on his handsome features.

“ Speak !” he said, forcibly removing her hands from her face; “ say, is it true or false ? Is the noble name of Vitelli, the proudest of all Italy, disgraced in you ? Answer, yes or no.”

“ Mercy, mercy; spare me, brother!”

“ Is it true ?”

“ It is true,” she murmured; and then falling on her knees before him, again covered her face with her hands and wept.

There was a silence of some minutes, during which he stood sternly frowning on the kneeling girl at his feet.

Presently the violence of her grief somewhat abated, and she timidly looked up.

“ No woman of our family ever shamed her name and lived.”

Those were the terrible words he spoke.

She rose to her feet, dashed aside her tears, and stood before him, calm, pale, resolved.

“ Be it so, brother; I will die. God knows, life is a burden. But first listen to me. I knew not who or what I was, only that I was under the care of the Prince Vitelli. He caused me to be educated in a convent, and furnished with every luxury and requisite. At the age of fifteen he sent for me, and I was taken to his palace at Naples. I am told, and believe, I am

beautiful—accursed gift; for that beauty has caused my shame. I was but a child, and yet the instincts of honour, or, mayhap, the blood of the Vitelli flowing in my veins, led me to scorn the prince's overtures ; for he professed a deep, a desperate passion for me, and tried all means to make me yield to his wishes. But I was strong in my virtue, and neither threats, persuasions, nor persecutions could move me. At last he offered me marriage. I was alone, friendless in the world, and dependent on him for the very bread I ate. I loved him not, yet consented to wed him, feeling that thus I should at least avoid disgrace. We were married by a priest privately in the palace, and immediately afterwards my husband took me to a country-house of his near Capua, where I remained till my child was born. The prince was frequently away, sometimes remaining absent for weeks together. This, however, troubled me little, till one day the thunder-cloud burst, and I learned that I was a mother without being a wife—for the prince had a wife living when he married me—married me !” she said bitterly ;—“ rather, went through a solemn mockery, for the priest was no priest—a creature, a favourite of his own. At first I thought to fly for ever from the villain who had deceived me, but I was helpless and in his power. Though he had thus bitterly wronged, he yet wished to retain me, professing to love me—love !—such love as he bears his horse or hound ! All my efforts to escape were futile. I was hopelessly in his power ; and,

finally, for my child's sake, I continued his mistress, although I was not his wife. He promised that my child should be brought up with his own, and that when his lawful wife, who was in ill health, should die, he would then marry me. At the present moment my child is in his palace, and receives equal care to that of his wife the princess."

"So you, then, Lucrecia Vitelli, are the mistress of our father's murderer—your child being brought up under his roof?"

"Our father's murderer! Great God! Andrea! it is not—cannot be true," she said, pale as death, and with a look of genuine horror on her beautiful, childlike face.

"Listen, Lucrecia : I will relate a history which should make your heart throb with horror and hatred of your child's father :

"The late Prince Urban Vitelli was childless. Our father, Count Francis, was his nephew, and heir to the title and possessions. Urban was a good, kind-hearted man, and from pity took in and sheltered a distant relative, a poor and homeless man. This was Hercules Vitelli. The prince had no son, and our father and this poor relation Hercules were his sole kindred; so that, should Francis die, Hercules would be the heir. This man Hercules feigncd a great friendship with our father, who, of a generous and mild disposition, did not doubt its truth. But soon after the arrival of Hercules, a strange malady seized on our father—a malady which the

physicians could neither cure nor even comprehend. Day by day he languished, suffering acute pain, till his handsome form was reduced to a skeleton, and the doctors almost gave up all hope. At that time you, Lucrecia, were but three years of age. I was between eleven and twelve. Ever since the illness of our father, I, who passionately loved him, was not allowed to see him, or even enter into his room. Mercedes and Hercules alone attended him, and administered his food and medicine. Shortly after this strange malady seized him, the Prince Urban Vitelli was also taken ill. I have said that I loved our father, as did all who approached him, even to the very scullery-boys. Determined to see him, I watched my opportunity, and one day stole into the chamber where he lay. Scarcely had I entered, than I heard footsteps and voices in the vestibule behind me. The voices were those of Mercedes and Hercules. Dreading to be discovered, I hastily secreted myself behind the tapestry, thinking they would soon leave. Through a slight rent, I could see all that passed.

“Mercedes and Hercules walked straight up to the bed.

“‘Well, cousin, are you better to-night?’ said the traitor.

“‘Better! alas, no, Hercules; this terrible gnawing pain is killing me.’

“‘Ah! you must take some more of the elixir.’

“‘No, no,’ I heard my father say imploringly. ‘It burns me; it causes me agony; my heart and throat seem hot as fire after it. I will take no more.’

“‘Count, we are your friends; the physicians have ordered it; it will save your life. Come, drink!’

“And then I saw Mercedes pour out a liquor from a phial, and hand it to the sick man.

“Painfully he raised himself up in the bed, and I saw him drink up the draught. Then with a groan he fell back, and I saw him writhing in horrible pain, while these two fiends looked on. Fieuds I call them, for the medicine they administered was poison.

“‘Bear up, count; bear up,’ said the woman; ‘the medicine causes pain at first, but it is infallible.’

“‘Poor cousin,’ said Hercules, ‘how you suffer!’

“While our poor father was still writhing and groaning from the pain the devilish compound caused him, a servant rushed into the room.

“‘The prince! the prince!’ he cried.

“‘Well, what?’ cried Hercules.

“‘He has fallen in a fit, and is dead.’

“Instantly our father, though in terrible pain, rose from the couch.

“‘The prince is dead,’ he cried, ‘and I may soon be dead. I have a son. I must see to his rights. I will show myself—proclaim myself Prince

of Monte Leone, Count of Vitelli, and Lord of Ascoli. Then shall my son Andrea inherit when I am gone. Mercedes ! my clothes ; then retire while I dress myself. Hercules, you remain ; I shall require your arm, for I am weak as a child.'

"Mercedes hurriedly dismissed the servant, but did not go herself. I saw Hercules whisper something in her ear, and then a glance of terrible meaning passed between them.

"' You are too ill, count—too weak ; lie down,' said this abominable woman.

"' Cousin, I will attend to this ; I will proclaim you prince. Retire to your couch.'

"' No, no ; I will proclaim myself. I will trust this to no other hands. I have not long to live, and my son must inherit.'

" Again I saw Hercules Vitelli whisper to the woman. Our father was sitting on the edge of the couch.

" Suddenly Hercules put out his right arm, and thrust him back. Then—O God ! shall I ever forget it ?—Mercedes handed him the pillow, and I saw him press it over the sick man's mouth. Though our father was sick even to death, he struggled terribly, and his muffled cries drowned the faint shriek which I gave as I fell fainting to the floor.

" When I recovered, and, lifting the tapestry, passed into the room, I saw the dead body of the brave, the noble Francis Vitelli stretched on the couch ; the features livid, and horribly distorted ;

the hands twisted and twined together, as they were when the struggle ended in death.

“ I fled from the room ; but was shortly seized by Hercules Vitelli, who handed me over to a brigand whom he knew, giving him a sum of money to kill me. The man took the money, but not my life ; for even bandits have hearts, Lucrecia ; and when I told my story, his heart was moved to pity. I was taken to the mountains, brought up with the band, and now—I, Andrea Vitelli—am King of the Abruzzi. Three years ago Hercules Vitelli learned I was alive, and knew the enemy who burned his castles and ravaged his lands. A dozen times I could have taken his life, but preferred to render that life a burden, his very existence one of terror and fear, till the time should come for my vengeance.

“ Now, Lucrecia Vitelli, you have heard. What say you ? Are you fit to live—you, the mistress of our father’s murderer, the mother of his child ? Speak !”

She arose, and stood before him with clasped hands, a look of terror and earnest entreaty on her face.

“ I am not worthy to live—I know, I acknowledge it ; but, brother, spare me, let me live, if only for my child’s sake. I am young, and it is terrible to die.”

He paid no attention to her entreaty, looking calmly on, as though utterly indifferent.

“One more question, Lucrecia. Just before I entered, a young man came out; who was it?”

“Antonio.”

“A lover—ha! Your alarm, your confusion, attest the truth. His sword did me good service awhile back. Nevertheless, he must die.”

A shriek burst from the girl’s lips as she heard this terrible sentence uttered by the bandit—a sentence which she knew would be carried out; for all Italy rang with tales of the swift and sure vengeance of Andrea Vitelli, or Demonio, as he was called. When death had been threatened by him, in no case had the victim escaped.

“He must die, Lucrecia. You, he, and Hercules Vitelli have brought shame on our father’s name. Hercules is doomed to a life of terror and misery, to be closed by a terrible death; but his time is not yet. You I *cannot* kill, though it were right I should do so; but this Antonio, he must die by my hand.”

“Brother! brother! Andrea! unsay those dreadful words! Spare him, for I love him. Let not my fault bring death to him. Accept my life in his stead, and spare him.”

“Ha!”

“Take my life, but spare him,” she repeated frantically.

“You and he cannot both live,” he said gloomily; “one must die.”

She was now terribly excited; her bosom heaved,

her heart beat, and quick sobs burst from her, almost choking her utterance.

“ Brother ! my child ! my child ! If I die, promise to be a father to my child ; to remove him from the palaece of our enemy. You can, if you please. All know your power, and that not the shield of an emperor can protect from your vengeance. Promise me.”

“ He looked sadly at her—a look full of sorrow, pity, even affection ; but he did not say the word which should bid her live.

“ Where is the child ?” he said.

She pointed to the palace of Hercules, which could be plainly seen.

“ Do you see yonder window—the third from the angle? it is shaded by red curtains. My child is in that room.”

“ I promise,” said the bandit shortly.

“ Adieu, Andrea ! Thus do I expiate my shame, and vindicate the name of Vitelli.”

Then, with a piercing shriek, she mounted the low parapet.

Hesitating only for one brief moment, Lucrecia Mammona threw herself into the clear river which rolled silently on, a hundred feet below.

Andrea Vitelli heard the dull plunge in the water ; and then, pale, gloomy, but quite calm, he reentered the saloon, descended the stairs, and passed from the house.

The bandit walked rapidly on in the direction of

the palace of Prince Hercules. But for the deadly pallor of his face there was no outward sign in his manner or bearing which would lead to suppose he had just witnessed the suicide of a sister.

Once, on turning a street-corner, a drunken reveller stood in his path, and nearly staggered against him. Andrea Vitelli, with an oath, struck the fellow a desperate blow on the mouth with his sword-hilt, which sent him staggering into the road, where he lay stunned and bleeding.

But Andrea strode on, without even deigning a look.

The palace of Prince Hercules Vitelli stood in a large open space, and was surrounded by a moat, which at that time, however, was dry. A drawbridge thrown across gave access to the courtyard. The entrance was guarded by soldiers, and the yard itself was filled with a noisy crowd, who made merry there at the expense of the prince, while their masters were entertained within.

Andrea Vitelli halted opposite the entrance, and after gazing moodily for a moment, turned and walked rapidly away, muttering :

“I must make sure, for I have promised. ‘Twould be madness to attempt to cut my way through that crowd, drunken sots as they are.”

He hastily retraced his steps, and mounted his horse, which he had left outside the villa of Lucrezia Mammona. Driving his spurs into the horse’s flanks, he galloped furiously off, and did not pull

up till he had gained a small wood, or rather clump of trees, beyond the town. From this there issued several dark figures, one of whom approached him.

“ Outside the palace of Hercules Vitelli, with twenty men ! Make all haste.”

Then he turned his horse’s head, and galloped back as furiously as he had come.

“ *Peste !* our chief is in one of his black moods to-night,” said the lieutenant to whom he had given the order. “ God help the man who crosses his path to-night ! Come, let us be going.”

The next moment, a band of some twenty men might have been seen walking swiftly and silently towards the town.

Andrea Vitelli halted, and dismounting, fastened his horse to a post at the rear of the palace. Then he proceeded to scrutinise the windows, till his eye rested on the one with the crimson curtains. It was this window which the unfortunate Lucrecia had pointed out to him.

Without a moment’s hesitation, the bandit leaped into the fosse, and clambered up the other side. Then he drew his dagger, and inserted it between the stones of the masonry, at about the height of his shoulder. With wonderful agility, he contrived to mount on this, and could then reach the projecting sill of the window with his hands. He instantly swung himself up, and throwing open the window, which was unfastened, entered the room. It was a handsomely furnished chamber, well lighted and

warmed, and with every appliance of luxury. In casting his glance around, his eye rested on a richly draped cradle in one corner of the room. This was what he sought evidently, for he walked straight to it, and drew aside the curtains.

But at that moment an exclamation of dismay broke from him, for reposing there, calmly asleep, were *two infants*.

“ Ah !” he muttered, “ two—one Lucrecia’s, the other the child of my enemy’s wife. How can I tell which ?”

While he yet hesitated, shouts and the noise of approaching steps fell on his ear.

He knew not that at the moment he leaped into the fosse, and proceeded to climb the wall, he had been seen ; but such was the fact, and it was none other than the fierce Capitano whose eyes had at once recognised him. Far too wary to risk his skin by attacking the terrible bandit single-handed, this redoubtable warrior rushed open-mouthed over the drawbridge into the courtyard, shouting :

“ Demonio ! Demonio ! Follow me. He is in the palace.”

Many were disposed to think him mad, but they nevertheless followed him into the banqueting-hall, where the prince and his guests were seated.

“ Demonio ! Demonio !” he cried.

The prince started to his feet.

“ Have you seen him ? where is he ?”

“ Here, here ; in the castle.”

"Fool! madman! explain yourself," cried the prince, while all present uttered exclamations of alarm and astonishment.

"I saw Andrea Vitelli dismount from his horse, cross the moat, and then, climbing the wall, enter one of the windows of the palace, the one with the red curtains."

"Ha! the red curtains! the children! Follow me, gentlemen."

Then, pale with terror, the prince hurried from the room, his drawn sword in his hand.

All followed his example, and hastened along the corridors of the palace, towards the room which the bandit had entered.

Andrea Vitelli was still bending over the cradle, unable to decide which was the child he had sworn to protect, when the door was burst open, and the prince rushed in, followed by all those in the palace who were armed.

Without a moment's hesitation, Andrea Vitelli seized both infants, and wrapped them in the folds of his capacious coat. He then made for the window; but the prince and some of his followers had planted themselves there, while the doorway was thronged by the bullies of the gallant Capitano.

"Surrender! bandit! villain!" shouted the prince.

"Never, murderer!" was the undaunted reply.

"Seize him, dead or alive! A thousand crowns to the man who kills him!"

Several advanced towards him with drawn swords.

Andrea drew his sword, but instead of turning its point towards his foes, he threw back his cloak, and directed it towards the two children.

"Stand back!" he shouted. "Hercules Vitelli, you know me, and that I never fail to keep my promise. Stand back, and listen to me, or, by the God of heaven, I will drive my sword through your child's heart!"

"Ah!" cried the prince, "my child! my child! Spare my child! Put down the children, and you shall be suffered to go free."

Andrea laughed scornfully, and pricked one of the infants with his sword; a cry of pain instantly followed.

"Stand back, Hercules Vitelli! stand back! nor hesitate a moment, and listen to me. In five seconds I will kill both these children, and then cut my way through these cowardly hounds of yours."

"Cowardly hounds!" said Capitano. "Give but the word, prince, and I will run the wretch through the body."

"No, no! my child! he will kill my child! Stand back, and let us hear what ransom he demands."

"Ransom—ha, ha!" The bandit laughed scornfully. "Stand back, and I will tell you."

In obedience to a sign from the prince, all fell back from the window.

"Speak, Andrea Vitelli. Name your ransom,
lay down the children, and go."

But Andrea Vitelli no sooner saw the road to the window clear, than, whirling his sword round his head, he leaped on to the balcony, dealing Capitano a back-handed thrust as he did so.

Without a moment's hesitation, he leaped clear over, and alighting on his feet, crossed the moat, and was standing on the other side before the prince and his people could recover from their dismay.

"Hercules Vitelli," he shouted, "falsely called Prince of Monte Leone, murderer and coward—when you want your child, send the ransom."

"What ransom? Name the sum; it shall be sent to-morrow."

The bandit mounted his horse, and ere riding off, turned in the saddle, and said, with a loud laugh:

"The only ransom I will accept is the head of Hercules Vitelli. Whoever brings in that, shall have the children."

Then he galloped off.

"Shoot him! kill him! Why do you all stand staring there?"

The prince himself seized an arquebuse, and discharged it at the retreating figure of the bandit.

Instantly the report of twenty shots rang out from the street, and several of those who had hurried out on the balcony to fire, fell dead or wounded.

These shots came from the band of Andrea Vitelli, who had hastened to follow their chief.

END OF PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

THE BANDIT IN HIS MOUNTAIN HOME.

SIXTEEN years have rolled on since the night when Andrea Vitelli, the audacious bandit, carried off the two children.

Again and again has the prince sent, offering to ransom his child, on each occasion increasing the price. But to all his entreaties and proposals Andrea has but one answer. The messenger is sent back without his ears, and usually the following night a descent is made on the plains, and the light of burning castles and houses, the property of the prince, attests that Demonio's vengeance is not yet satisfied.

What an age of misery and terror has that sixteen years been to the childless, wretched old man ! His possessions ravaged and pillaged, his vassals killed, his daughter a prisoner, himself in continual terror of his life—a life which his enemy refuses to take, preferring to let him live on in terror and anguish of heart.

Andrea Vitelli lords it in the mountains, a very king. Villages have sprung up, and his band has swelled from a few hundred to several thousand

well-armed and desperate men. He has now two large castles, and a dozen fortified places in the mountains. Indeed, the word ‘bandit’ has ceased to be applied to him, and he is recognised universally as the legitimate sovereign of the mountains. On several occasions his free-lances have done good service under the banner of more than one Italian potentate, and it is well known that even among old-established kingdoms the mountain-chief has more friends than enemies ; for he has scrupulously confined his ravages to the dominions and estates of Hercules Vitelli and his immediate friends.

But, terrible as is the name of Andrea Vitelli to his enemies, there is yet another who carries greater terrors and more horror. There is bruited abroad a wild story, to the effect that Andrea is supernaturally aided, and that a mysterious being, more than mortal, occasionally issues from the mountains, followed by a band of ferocious blacks. Terrible are the ravages of this mountain-fiend ; ruthless are the murders perpetrated by this black band of demons. Fire and blood mark their course across the fertile plains. No one, not even Vitelli’s own men, know aught of these terrible strangers. Neither does any one know whence they come, or whither they go.

Sweeping down on the plain at a furious gallop, they pursue their ravages by dead of night, and ere morning breaks are again gone, no one knows where.

Their leader is held in especial terror. Those who have seen him describe him as a dark young man, elegantly made, dressed in black velvet. His face is the face of an angel, so singularly beautiful ; but his heart, if one half of the tales reported be true, black as that of a devil.

Hence this mysterious and terrible personage has received the name of Bel Demonio, the beautiful fiend.

The sixteen years which had rolled on had made but little difference in Andrea Vitelli, either outwardly or inwardly. He was still the same fierce, turbulent spirit, and still cherished his implacable hate to Hercules Vitelli. His features were perhaps more bronzed, and a few silver threads might be seen in his dark hair ; otherwise the bandit was unaltered. Silent and reserved, few were admitted to his confidence ; and when not in the saddle on some desperate adventure, he passed most of his time in gloomy grandeur,—sitting for hours in the great hall of his castle communing with his own thoughts.

But few people were permitted to enter unbidden into the chief's presence ; one was his lieutenant, another his son Mario ; while the two girls —his nieces, Regina and Alma—did absolutely as they pleased.

It was while Andrea Vitelli was sitting alone, buried in deep thought, that Regina entered the room, dressed in riding costume. At first he did

not notice her ; but the young girl attracted his attention by playfully striking him across the shoulders with her whip.

“ Uncle, I am going for a ride up the mountain.”

“ Alone, Regina ?”

“ Alone—yes ; what should I fear ? None dare interfere with me. Besides, have I not the pistols you gave me ?”

“ Will not Alma go with you, child ?”

“ Alma ! oh, what nonsense ! You know that Alma is too timid. When I ride with her, she always wishes to select level ground, and then I can never persuade her to urge her horse beyond a gentle canter. For my part, I like to tear up the steep mountain-side like one of our own winter tempests.”

“ Ah, Regina, Alma is a timid little fawn ; you a beautiful tigress. I believe you would really like to lead the band yourself. The next time my lieutenant displeases me, I will appoint you in his place.”

The girl's dark eyes blazed, and her cheek flushed, as though in very truth she would have been willing to accept the post offered in jest. But she said nothing on the point, and changed the subject by asking :

“ Where is cousin Mario ?”

“ Mario ?” replied Andrea absently ; “ I don't know. I think he said he was going up the mountain to the Devil's Horn.”

"Good by, uncle ; I am going for a long ride, and shall not be back till night."

"Take care of yourself, my child ; I fear you are too rash. I scarcely like these long absences. Strange that the mountains should have such attractions for you ! Now, I could understand it, if it were a gay town which kept you away from home ; but the wild, dismal hills ! What can a young girl find to charm her there ? I shall really begin to think that you pay secret visits to this mysterious mountain fiend, 'Bel Demonio,' as they call him."

The girl coloured up crimson, laughingly turned away, and left the room.

"What a strange girl !—so different from the gentle Alma. I can scarce conceive that she is the daughter of my poor dead sister, Lucrecia Mammona ; but so it is ; for did not the nurse Mercedes tell me so the only time I have seen her since ? She is a glorious girl—a very Amazon. I love her as my own daughter, but not as I love Alma. Ah ! if aught were to befall Alma, I believe I should die ; and yet she is the daughter of my implacable foe, the murderer of my father. Little did I think, when I took her as an infant from the palace of the false prince, that she would ever thus have entwined herself around my heart."

The clattering of horse's hoofs in the courtyard interrupted his thoughts, and rising, he went to the window and looked out. He was just in time to see

Regina gallop across the drawbridge, and shape her course up one of the mountain paths.

She wore a dark-gray riding-dress trimmed with velvet, and a small cap of the same material, with an eagle's plume by way of ornament. In a belt around her slender waist she carried a pair of small silver-mounted pistols, also a jewelled dagger. Her luxuriant dark hair was loosely gathered up in a net of silver, some tresses escaping and floating over her shoulders. Her figure was the perfection of grace and elegance, while her face was ravishingly beautiful. She was a brunette in complexion, with those splendid dark eyes only to be seen in Italy. Regina was only seventeen, but looked at least two years older. Indeed, her figure, though slender and graceful, was fully developed, and might have served for an artist's model. She was of a wild, ungovernable temper, and, always accustomed to have her every wish gratified, never knew the meaning of contradiction. Her cousin Alma gave way in every particular to the impetuous Regina, who, if Andrcia was master, was certainly only second to him in influence and power. The men of the band and the inhabitants of the villages around all feared and admired Regina—proud of their beautiful "mountain queen," as they called her. But Alma they adored. It was Alma who stood their friend, and saw to their wants when wounded or sick. It was Alma's name that old men and women taught little children to murmur in their prayers:

Alma, so sweet, so gentle, so lovely and lovable, engrossed all their affections ; while Regina claimed their admiration and wonder by her charming beauty. Up the steep mountain-path she tore at full speed. pricking her horse with the small silver spur she wore on her heel each time that he seemed to flag ; her hair streaming in the wind, her dark eye flashing, a bright flush on her beautiful cheek from the excitement and the rapid motion. As she swept by, every one she passed respectfully doffed his hat, and stood bareheaded till she was gone ; for Regina was imperious, and a real queen in that respect, and claimed homage as by right.

Presently she came in her ride to a little village in a valley between two hills. Here she halted by the side of a well to give her horse water, and some of the inhabitants hastened around to hold her horse or perform any service she might require.

" Well, my good people," she said, in a rich, clear voice, " how fares it with you ? and what news have you ? "

Several voices cried out at once, " Bel Demonio, signorita ! "

" Bel Demonio ! Well, what of him ? "

" He came down from the mountain last night, and a few hours later the light of burning houses marked his track."

" Ha ! Bel Demonio ! Did you see him ? "

" He galloped through the village an hour before midnight, followed by his twenty black fiends."

" So his followers are all black, are they ?"

" Yes, signorita ; fierce, black people, such as those who inhabit Morocco. They each wear a large white cloak, the hood of which comes over the head, and partly hides the face. But we have seen enough to know that they are all black men—meu !—Heaven preserve us ! not men, but fiends."

" Ha ! and is Bel Demonio black, too ?"

" Ah, no, signorita. He wears a mask ; but one night wheu galloping past it fell off, and we saw his face. Ah, such a face !"

" What, hideous ?"

" Hideous ! no, signorita ; it was the face of an angel, so gloriously handsome : a dark young man, apparently not more than twenty years of age. Who could think that a being with so handsome a face could do such terrible deeds ! for it is well known that Bel Demonio spares neither man, woman, nor child when on his expeditions."

" Ah, bah ! you are all afraid of this terrible Bel Demonio. I wish I could see him. I declare I think I should fall in love with him, since you say he is so very handsome. I should like to see this terrible Bel Demonio immensely."

" Heaven forbid, lady, and protect you from so dreadful an evil !"

Then, with a scornful laugh, she spurred her horse, and dashed onwards at a gallop.

She did not halt until she arrived at a small piece of table-land, at the summit of a hill called

the Devil's Horn. This hill commanded a view of the country for many miles, and was frequently resorted to on that account. But Regina found herself not the sole occupant of this place. Her cousin Alma was before her, and was now seated on a rock gazing out on the fertile plain, bathed in the bright morning sun. She started with alarm as Regina galloped up the hill, and appeared suddenly before her ; but when she saw who it was, she rose and affectionately greeted her.

Regina leaped from the horse, and throwing the rein across his neck, allowed him to go free.

" There, Merlin ; I am not afraid of your running away ; you may go and browse the herbage till I want you." Then to Alma : " What on earth brings you up here, Alma, this morning ? and where is your horse ?"

" Oh, I did not come on horseback ; I walked," she replied.

" Walked ! you must have had some very strong inducement to walk so far ?"

Alma coloured up, and replied :

" You know, Regina, I am not so bold a rider as you ; I tremble when I ride by the edges of those terrible precipices which you make so light of. And as for galloping as you do, Regina, I should as soon think of flying. See, here is a beautiful bouquet ; I gathered it for you on my walk up."

She handed the flowers to Regina, who seated

herself by her side, and commenced absently to pick them to pieces.

"Oh, Regina!" Alma said, after a while, with a pretty look of terror on her fair features, "do you know, they told me in the villages I passed through that the evil spirit, Bel Demonio, descended into the plain last night, and committed terrible ravage? Is it not dreadful?"

"Ah! bah!" rejoined Regina pettishly; "I am tired of hearing of Bel Demonio. It is nothing else but Bel Demonio morning, noon, and night. I only wish I could see this terrible fellow."

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, Regina, do not say such a dreadful thing; you know, if you ask for the devil, he sometimes appears; and only suppose if Bel Demonio were to appear before us now!"

"Ha, ha, ha! you little simpleton!" laughed Regina. "And you are really frightened of this mysterious person! Wait till I see him; I will invite him to the castle."

"Oh, my poor bouquet!" said Alma, noticing that Regina had totally destroyed it; "it was so pretty, and I took such pains to gather it, thinking you would like it."

The gentle girl's eyes filled with tears; but Regina lightly consoled her, saying:

"Never mind, Alma; I am very sorry; I was not thinking of what I was doing."

"Oh, and do you know, Regina, I saw the *dark woman*? She followed me for a long way, and as I

thought she wished to speak to me, I stopped ; but she vanished immediately, as though afraid."

Regina crossed herself devoutly, and said :

" For Heaven's sake, Alma, do not have any thing to say to that dreadful witch. I would not speak to her for worlds."

" Surely, Regina, you are not afraid of the poor woman ; you who are so brave, and do not even fear Bel Demonio ?"

" Ah ! this is another affair altogether ; the woman is a witch. As for Bel Demonio, I do not believe in all the ill tales I hear."

" But hundreds have seen him, Regina."

" Pshaw ! all we hear is exaggerated. Depend upon it, he is no more than an ordinary bandit. Come, let us return ; you can ride behind me, and cling on."

" Oh, Regina, I would rather walk."

" Nonsense ! don't be so silly, child, or I shall think you have some appointment or assignation here."

Alma blushed violently, and yielded without further opposition ; and Regina, having taken her place in the saddle, she helped her up behind, and they commenced to descend the mountain.

Presently, however, Regina, in sport, urged the horse on, first to a canter, then to a gallop, laughing at and enjoying her cousin's terrors. But what she commenced in sport the horse continued in earnest, and becoming unmanageable, tore along,

at a fearful pace, towards a nearly perpendicular precipice.

Alma screamed with terror ; and Regina in vain pulled with all her strength at the rein. She saw the terrible peril ; but, though very pale, she gave vent to no useless cries, but lent all her energies to the endeavour to stop the horse.

In vain ; the steed madly plunges forward. A piercing shriek rings from Alma, and even Regina gives a little cry of despair, as the horse reaches the brink.

But at the very instant when another bound must have carried horse and riders over the edge of the almost perpendicular descent, a young man, with a carbine slung over his shoulder, suddenly appeared, and instantly seizing the horse's bridle, exerted his strength, and, after a moment's struggle, succeeded in throwing the animal back on his haunches.

But the sudden shock was sufficient to cause Alma to loose her hold, and she would have fallen to the ground, had not the young man caught her in his arms.

The horse stood trembling and panting, while Regina, though deadly pale, kept her seat, and endeavoured to appear unconcerned.

Presently, however, her brow grew dark, and she moved restlessly in her seat, her dark eyes flashing lightning.

“ Alma ! my sweet Alma ! say you are not hurt,” murmured the young man, as he held the fainting

girl in his arms. Her soft brown ringlets, disordered by the wind, fell in showers over her neck and shoulders ; one arm was thrown unconsciously, as it were, around the neck of her preserver—her face resting against his shoulder. She was still insensible, though an occasional heaving sigh told that she was slowly recovering.

“ Ah ! bah !” (a favourite exclamation of hers) ; “ cousin Mario,” said Regina, “ what a fuss you make about Alma ! She is not hurt at all, and only a little frightened. For my part, I do not thank you for seizing Merlin so roughly by the bridle. The poor fellow has not got over it yet. See how he trembles !”

“ Why, in Heaven’s name, Regina, what are you talking of ?” said the young man. “ In another second you would have been over the precipice, and dashed to pieces. It was indeed fortunate that I was coming up the mountain-path, and heard the sounds of the horse’s hoofs. ’Twas a most miraculous escape.”

“ Escape ! nonsense ! I was but amusing myself by galloping close to the edge in order to frighten Alma. Do you think I am not sufficiently skilful to guide Merlin within a few yards of the brink without going over ?”

Mario Vitelli (for he it was) looked up in astonishment, still continuing, however, tenderly to chafe the hands of Alma.

“ Regina, I know you are bold and daring as the

mountain-eagle, but can scarcely believe you purposely rushed on to destruction in such a way ; for I know well, that, had I not appeared, no power on earth could have saved you. See the hoof-marks on the very brink ! I believe, too, that my shoulder is dislocated by the shock."

" You seem wonderfully taken up with Alma," she replied pettishly, " and do not even pay me the compliment to ask me if I am hurt."

" Because, Regina, you are brave and daring ; while my poor little Alma here is timid and delicate."

" Ah ! bah ! she is not hurt. See, she opens her eyes. Come ; I shall descend the mountain. Will you place her on the horse behind me again ?"

" No, no," murmured Alma ; " let me take your arm, Mario. I am afraid to ride again. I feel faint."

" Had you not better loosen her corset, Mario ? She will not mind ; see how she clings to you."

This was said pettishly, and with a mocking smile.

Alma blushed up, and gently releasing herself from her cousin's arms, stood up :

" Regina, you are unkind. Indeed, I was very much frightened, and feel quite weak and faint now ; but I think I can walk."

" Shall I carry you, Alma dear ?" said Mario.

" Thanks, cousin ; but if you will let me lean on your arm, I can walk."

Then they all three started, Regina leading the way, while Mario supported his sweet cousin with his strong arm.

"She loves him—she loves him," murmured Regina to herself; "but does he love her? I think not; his looks, his language to me, have often betrayed his admiration. I know I am more beautiful than she. But then, too, sometimes his looks and his manner to her are so tender. I must make him jealous. But of whom? Let me think. Of the lieutenant? No. He would never be jealous of him; he is too old and ugly. Of whom, then? Mario does not choose to descend to the villages and towns on the plain, so I can never wound him through one of my many noble and gallant admirers. Ha! I have it. Ha, ha, ha! This mysterious mountain-chief, of whom people talk, is said to be beautiful as summer-night. Mario is continually talking of him. I will give out that I have met him in one of my many excursions: that he is handsome and brave; accomplished and gallant also. Ha, ha, ha! *I will make him jealous of BEL DEMONIO!*"

CHAPTER II.

ALL that day Regina kept aloof from her cousin, and even her uncle Andrea, strolling restlessly about; her clouded brow and preoccupied air giving cause to

believe she was deeply intent on some design or project.

On the following morning she entered the large hall, where the chief usually spent some time alone each day.

None were allowed to intrude on him here unbidden, with the exception of his nieces Regina and Alma, and his son Mario.

"Uncle," said Regina, seating herself on his knee, and looking in his face, "I am going for a long ride up in the hills presently."

"Well, handsome young Amazon," he said fondly, "that is nothing unusual, is it? Upon my honour, you go where you like, when you like, and stay as long as you like. For days together I sometimes do not know whether you are at home or not. Now, were it Alma, I should on these occasions feel alarmed; but for you, how can I feel afraid, as brave as you are beautiful? I should as soon think of fearing for Mario, or my lieutenant Luigi."

"Ah! but, uncle, this time I am going on a very strange errand."

"Well! what new madcap prank, pretty one?"

"You have heard of Bel Demonio?"

"Ha! Bel Demonio!" And as he pronounced the words, an angry scowl came on the chief's features.

Yes; I have heard of Bel Demonio—heard much that is wonderful, if true, and, what is more, displeasing to me. I must ere long go and unearth this mysterious being, and discover who it is that dares

plant another free flag in the Abruzzi without the leave of Andrea Vitelli. They say this fellow is not mortal, and, sooth to tell, some of his deeds are truly those of a fiend. Were I sure this was but an audacious man, with a desperate band, I would soon exterminate both. But all my people say 'tis the foul fiend in person ; and though not known as a coward, I care little for such an encounter."

" Well, uncle, I am going upon the hills to try and discover this dreaded Bel Demonio, and know whether he be man or fiend."

Andrea Vitelli, like most Italians of that age, was superstitious to a degree.

" No, no, Regina !" he cried, starting to his feet, " you shall not go ; I utterly forbid it. *Peste !* I will have none of my kith or kin holding converse with that mountain-fiend, if he indeed be a fiend. But of that I shall shortly know ; and should he prove mortal, woe betide him. His head shall pay for his audacity and the uneasiness he has caused."

" Oh, uncle, I did so want to see this Bel Demonio !" said Regina, pouting.

" Impossible, my child. It cannot be. Regina, leave me, and send hither Mario and Luigi. It is time I again led an expedition to the territories of my enemy, or he will think my vengeance sleeps."

Regina hurried away, and sent her uncle's message by one of the attendants.

Ten minutes later, her horse's hoofs might have been heard clattering over the drawbridge.

"Who was it that rode out this moment, Mario?" asked Andrea of his son.

"Regina."

"What horse has she taken?"

"Her black horse, Merlin."

"The self-willed jade! Then I'll be sworn she's off to the mountains in search of Bel Demonio. She always takes Merlin when on any unusually daring expedition."

"To see Bel Demonio!" exclaimed Mario in surprise; "explain, father."

"She but ten minutes ago informed me that she had heard so much of this man—fiend—whatever he be, that she was determined to seek him in his mountain-home."

"Bel Demonio!" said Mario, with unfeigned horror. "Holy saints proteet her! She could never be so mad as to seek that fiend?"

"Regina knows not the meaning of fear, and is capable of carrying out any adventure her caprice might dictate."

"And yet she is not without terrors of those things which are beyond mortal comprehension. She manifests the utmost horror of the wiche of the mountains, as she is called—the *dark woman*."

"Ha! I have heard of her also, but have never seen her, and feel inclined to think that both she and Bel Demonio are but the creatures of imagination."

"That is not so, father, for I myself have many times seen this mysterious woman hovering about.

That you have never seen her is easily accounted for. She invariably takes to flight on your approach, as though desirous to avoid you."

"I cannot understand it. It is strange, passing strange. Order fifty men to be in attendance in half an hour. My spies tell me the prince has to-day a hunting-party in the plains. He has had a long rest. It is time he be apprised that Andrea Vitelli has ncither forgotten him nor foregone his purpose."

No more was seen of Regina that day, nor had she returned when, late at night, Andrea Vitelli returned from his raid on the plain. But little was thought of this, as Regina had long been in the habit of coming and going as she chose.

On the following morning Mario Vitelli was leaning over the battlements of the eastern tower, gazing out over the broad expanse of country spread at the foot of the mountains, and counting mentally the number of castles and houses on the prince's estate they had pillaged and burned during the last year,—when a light hand is laid on his shoulder, and turning, he sees his beautiful cousin Regina by his side. She was not in riding-eostume, but wore a dress of white satin, with a corset of the same material fitting tight over her figure. It was cut low and square over her breast, revealing the beautiful outline of her throat and upper part of the bosom. Bareheaded, her luxurious hair was gathered loosely in a silver net, while a plain white rose was her only head dress. Her dark eyes flashed and

sparkled in the sunlight, a bright flush on her cheek, and an enchanting smile played on her features.

It was with unfeigned admiration that Mario gazed on his beautiful cousin. Who could be in the light of such beauty, and not feel warmed thereby? But, in addition to this surpassing loveliness of person, Regina had a fascinating manner, capable of intoxicating, driving to madness, all on whom she chose to exercise her power. Mario's eyes fell under the blaze of those two dark orbs looking full into his, and his heart beat faster as he said :

“Regina, you look very handsome this morning.”

“Do I, indeed, Mario?” she replied, in sweet, melting tones. “Ah! I am so glad you think so.”

There was a slight stress on the word *you*, which Mario half fancied was significant, and the colour rose to his cheek.

“But it is not about that I wish to talk, Mario; it is about something else. I have wonderful news. I cannot rest till I tell you. Alma would be frightened, and I am afraid to tell uncle.”

She seated herself on the low parapet, and leaning one arm on his shoulder, bent down till her hair swept and her breath fanned his cheek.

“Mario,” she said in a low tone, “I have seen Bel Demonio.”

“Seen Bel Demonio, cousin! So may others, if report speaks truly.”

“Ah, but not a mere glimpse for a moment. I have seen him, have conversed with him, have been

in his mysterious house, miles up in the mountain—a retreat inaccessible to all but him and the eagles ; a retreat which can only be reached by leaping a vast chasm, many yards wide, and deep—oh, so deep—the bottom is hid in mist and darkness.”

“ But surely, Regina, he and his mysterious followers do not have to leap this terrible chasm every time they leave or return ?”

“ Yes, Mario, their horses are all trained to it.”

“ But you, Regina, how did you cross ?”

“ Bel Demonio lent me his own horse, and in order that I may visit him again has made me a present of it, and it is now in the stable, swifter, stronger, handsomer than any of ours. His name is Lucifer.”

“ Great heavens ! Regina, are you serious ? Do you really mean what you say ? Is it possible that you really visited this mysterious being, this mountain-fiend ?”

“ It is quite true, Mario ; and I mean to go again. Oh, he is charming, this Bel Demonio : so handsome, so accomplished ; with small white hands like those of a woman, a smile like an angel, a face like—”

“ Ay, and a heart like a fiend, if indeed he be not one, Regina.”

“ Oh, no ; impossible, Mario ! He is so gentle, so tender ; his voice is so musical. Ah, I could love this Bel Demonio ! Do come with me some day, dear Mario, and let us visit him together.”

As she spoke, she leaned forward, and drawing yet closer to her cousin, leaned her beautiful head on his shoulder, and gazing upwards, met his eyes with a melting, ravishing look which few could withstand.

"Ah, I know you will, Mario dear; you will not refuse me. Do say you will, and then I will—I will give you a kiss."

Mario's heart beat fast, and the blood rushed to his face, as he felt her warm breath, and basked in the fascinating light of her eyes. One of her hands was around his neck, and played carelessly with his hair, and still she kept bent full on him that melting, loving glance.

"Mario, say you will!" and the charming lips are temptingly turned towards his.

"Perhaps, Regina."

Instantly he feels the arm around his neck seize him in a close embrace, her face is pressed to his, her rich red lips to his—but for one instant; for ere he can awake from the intoxicating dream, she releases herself, and, with a light laugh, is gone.

Mario, with the imprint of his beautiful cousin's kiss yet lingering on his lips, paced up and down, a prey to conflicting thoughts.

Dazzled by her beauty and fascinating manner, he for the time forgot every thing but her.

"Bel Demonio! Bel Demonio!" he muttered angrily. "She speaks of Bel Demonio. She has seen him. She declares he is handsome and gallant.

She wishes to meet him again, and she has almost made me promise to accompany her. *Peste!* can it be that she is smitten by this bold bandit—she, Regina Vitelli? Never. A curse on this Bel Demonio! Could I but meet him, I would quickly test his invulnerability."

While the young man was yet fuming to himself, he was joined by another.

"Cousin Mario, what is it annoys you? I heard you mutter the name of Bel Demonio, and you look flushed and excited."

"Ah! Alma, my sweet one, is that you? I did not hear you come up. Yes," he added quickly, "I have had something to vex me, but it is no matter. Come and sit by me, and let us talk."

The young girl came and seated herself on the parapet, in the place occupied a few minutes previously by Regina. But unlike her glorious cousin, Alma's blue eyes timidly sought the ground, and it was only occasionally she stole a glance at Mario's face. Presently his ruffled spirit soothed down under the influence of her gentle presence. Like oil on troubled waters her words fell on his spirit, and soon his angry thoughts of Bel Demonio vanished. Forgotten were the blazing eyes of Regina as he looked on the deep heavenly blue of Alma's, which seemed to shrink and tremble before his ardent gaze; forgotten the burning kiss Regina's lips had pressed on his; forgotten all but the presence of Alma, and the consciousness of her sweet voice.

"Alma," he said, looking long and steadfastly at her,—“Alma, I love you.”

She answered not, but a bright blush flew to her cheek, and told that the avowal was not unwelcome.

He took her hand in his ; and she, feebly resisting, suffered it to remain.

“Alma, you know I love you, my own, my sweet one,” he whispered, drawing her to him. “Come, what say you ?”

But she deigned him no answer in words. For one moment she raised her heavenly blue eyes, and suffered them to rest on his face ; a glance, half-reproachful, half-deprecating, but carrying a world of love with it. Then she disengaged her hand, and, like Regina, hastened away, leaving Mario alone on the turret. Perhaps the sweet girl wished to weep tears of joy in her own chamber over the secret her cousin had that day disclosed—a secret, and yet no secret ; for had not her own heart long since guessed it ?

CHAPTER III.

REGINA LEAPS THE CHASM.

“UNCLE,” exclaimed Regina, running up to the chieftain, as he sat, according to his wont, in gloomy solitude, “I want you to give me something.”

“Well, child, what is it?” he asked, a smile breaking out on his stern countenance.

“You brought in a lot of horses and plunder

yesterday from the plains. I want you to give me some."

"Give you some horses? What on earth do you want with horses, Regina? Have you not two for your own use?"

"Ah, yes, uncle; but I want these for a present. Don't ask me for whom, because it is a secret. I will tell you to-morrow. Twenty horses, uncle, twenty carbines, and twenty pistols, and three kegs of powder,—that will be a noble present to my friend, will it not?"

"A noble present, indeed. Is the girl mad? In the name of all the saints, to whom are you going to give them?"

"Ah, don't ask me, uncle; I will tell you to-morrow. Mario is going with me, so there can be no harm."

"Ah, if Mario is going with you, it is, I suppose, all right. Mario is discreet, and I have no fears for you in his company. So, little tyrant, you can have the horses, the carbines, and the pistols and powder. Now run away; I wish to be alone."

She vanished like a spirit, and the next moment her clear voice might be heard calling:

"Mario, Mario! where are you?"

She quickly discovered him in his turret-retreat.

"Mario, I have asked uncle for twenty horses, twenty men, twenty carbines, and twenty pistols; send some of the men on with them to the Devil's Horn and we will meet them there."

"We? I did not know we were going. And what are the horses and carbines to go there for?"

"Mario, you know you promised to come with me?"

But Mario had forgotten all about the promise and the kiss.

"Come with you! whither, cousin?" he asked.

"To visit Bel Demonio; the horses, carbines, and pistols are for a present to him."

"Bel Demonio!" he exclaimed. "Great heavens! are you serious?"

"Serious! I am always serious; and I shall be angry directly," she cried, stamping her little foot on the ground. "Nevertheless, if you don't choose to accompany me, you may stay behind. I will go alone; Bel Demonio will be only too glad to see me."

Now at these words, notwithstanding the recent ove-passage between himself and Alma, a jealous pang shot through Mario's breast. Regina's dazzling beauty again asserted its sway, if not on his heart, on his passions, his imagination; and he at once determined that he would accompany her on her visit to the mysterious chief.

"I had forgotten, Regina," he said; "I will come with you. Get yourself in readiness, while I order the men to go on with the horses, the carbines, and the pistols. Whither did you say they were to be sent?"

"To the Devil's Horn; then we will go and in-

form Bel Demonio they are awaiting him, so that he may send some of his people for them."

"Strange," thought Mario to himself, as he walked across the courtyard, "that that girl should wield such extraordinary power over all with whom she comes in contact. Is it her glorious beauty, her wit, her daring, or what is it? Awhile ago I told sweet Alma I loved her; yet when I hear that Regina is about to visit this Bel Demonio, I feel—I feel as though I could kill him, or any other upon whom Regina looks with favour."

Having despatched the men with the horses and arms, with directions to proceed up the Devil's Horn, Mario ordered out and mounted his own horse, and waited in the courtyard for Regina.

She did not long keep him waiting, for he was scarcely in the saddle before she rode up on a splendid black charger.

Mario surveyed the steed with curiosity and admiration.

Andrea Vitelli had many fine horses in his stables, but none that could compete with this, either in breed or beauty.

"So this is the horse Bel Demonio gave you? This is Lucifer?"

"And is he not a splendid animal, cousin?" said Regina, patting his glossy neck.

"If he is only as fleet as he is handsome," rejoined Mario, "you have, indeed, a prize."

"To the test, Mario; come, follow me."

Regina gave a quick call or exclamation to Lucifer, who instantly pricked up his ears, and bounded off at a gallop.

Mario spurred after, and at one time seemed likely to overtake her ; but Regina, glancing back again, gave a cry of encouragement to her horse, and, in less than a minute, Mario was hopelessly distanced.

Regina did not rein-in until she reached the Devil's Horn, where she had to wait some minutes for her cousin, whose horse was not only beaten, but completely winded.

"Now, cousin Mario, what do you say to Bel Demonio's gift ?"

"A splendid one, indeed ! I doubt if there be such another in all Italy."

"Onwards ! you shall see Bel Demonio himself, in less than an hour."

Then the wild girl, with the shrill cry to Lucifer, started off at a gallop, heedless of the rough winding mountain-road.

Mario followed at his best pace, and, after half an hour's hard riding, they reined-in their horses in narrow defile running up a spur of the mountains, of a sugar-loaf form.

Their progress here was necessarily slow, for, besides the steep ascent, the road was strewn with huge boulders and fragments of rock.

Mario could not help remarking how well adapted the road was for defence ; for a small body of men in possession of the heights on either side might

with ease bid defiance to an army. Indeed, the thought struck him that the pass had been the scene of desperate conflicts, for the boulders and fragments of rock lying about at the bottom had evidently been hurled down from the steep sides.

Apparently, the defile led right up to the conical peak of the mountain ; but this was not so. Following the sinuous windings of the road, such as it was, on rounding a bend they came suddenly on a small open square. On the left this was bounded by the almost perpendicular side of the pass, on the right the same, while directly in front there was a yawning chasm, some twenty feet wide, separating them from the road which led up to the mountain-peak. A short distance on the other side was a rude hut, such as those inhabited by the shepherds and hunters of the hills.

"Yonder is the road to Bel Demonio's retreat," said Regina. "It's new to you, I think, Mario?"

Mario advanced cautiously to the brink of the dreadful gulf, and looked over. The sides were absolutely perpendicular, while the bottom lay thousands of feet below, shrouded in mist and darkness. Regina watched the expression of astonishment and awe on her cousin's face, and presently said mockingly :

"Well, cousin Mario, do you feel inclined to try the leap?"

"Heaven forbid, Regina ! No horse could accomplish it."

"Nevertheless Bel Demonio and his band cross it each time they go forth or return, for this is the only way to their mountain-home."

"Impossible, Regina ! you mock me."

Again she gave the same shrill cry to her horse, which instantly bounded forward.

"Regina, hold !" cried Mario in horror, as he saw her dash onwards to the yawning gulf.

Her answer was a mocking laugh. On went the steed, his hoofs clattering and striking fire on the rocky road.

Another bound, and he is beside the brink. Mario gives vent to a cry of dismay ; but, incredible though the feat seemed to him, the black horse Lucifer rose splendidly to the leap, cleared the chasm with perfect ease, and then pulled up short on the opposite side.

"Mario, I am now going to visit Bel Demonio," she said, speaking across the gulf to her cousin. " You return to the Devil's Horn, where the men are waiting with the horses and arms. Bel Demonio will come there to you. I shall be compelled to remain as a hostage until his safe return. Hasten back, then, or Bel Demonio will be there before you."

Regina then dismounted, and, leading the horse by the bridle, approached the rude hut, the doorway of which was towards the chasm. The back part was hidden by a growth of brushwood, and huge rocks, piled around obviously for that purpose.

Mario noticed her movements with curiosity,

mingled with awe. Still leading the horse by the bridle, she entered the door, followed by Lucifer, and both disappeared.

The next moment there rang out the clear blast of a trumpet. The sound apparently proceeded from the back of the hut; but of that he could not be certain.

There was a silence of some few seconds, and then, far up in the hills, was heard the shrill "*tantivi, tantivi,*" of another trumpet in reply.

Mario waited, watched, and listened; but for some time no other sound broke the stillness of the dreary solitude. But presently was heard the clattering of horse's hoofs, apparently from the rear of the hut. The sound receded, as though some one were riding up the hill by a hidden path, and then all was again quiet.

Mario waited for a short time, and then turned his horse's head, and commenced the descent.

In vain he pondered, and sought to solve the mystery in which his cousin Regina was involved. What knew she of Bel Demonio? What meant the trumpet-blast, and its reply? Whither had she gone? Was all this but a mockery—an endeavour to impose on his credulity by a reckless girl?

He could not reply.

While he thought and wondered in vain, he heard behind him the clatter of hoofs,—not of a solitary horse, but the thunder of many, as though a squadron of cavalry were charging down the mountain. Mario

drew his horse on one side, mounting the slope a few yards, so as both to command a view of the road behind him and to allow passage to those galloping thus furiously down the steep depths.

Onward comes the sound, and now above the clatter of hoofs he can hear shrill cries and shouts.

Mario was naturally brave; but even he trembled, and his soul quailed, as he remembered the many horrible tales of Bel Demonio.

He no longer doubted. He believed now that Regina had spoken truly, and that it was the terrible Bel Demonio himself and his band now rushing down the mountain towards him.

Down the steep mountain-defile the troop of horsemen swept, the wild shouts and yells growing louder and fiercer each moment.

Mario Vitelli's heart sank within him as he listened to the unearthly yells of Bel Demonio and his band. Even the very horse seemed to participate in the feeling, for he trembled and backed as far as possible from the road.

In less than a minute from the time when he had first heard the hoof-falls, the troop came in sight, and Mario noticed that all wore long white cloaks, and were waving their swords as though about to charge an enemy: all but one, and that was the leader, who rode on ahead, exhibiting none of the excitement of his followers. As they came close, Mario noticed that he was clothed in black velvet, and was masked, so that nothing could be

seen of his face but a pair of gleaming eyes. The pace at which they galloped by was furious, and the din caused by the clatter of hoofs and the yells of the blacks with the white cloaks fearful. Nevertheless, Mario retained his self-command sufficiently to observe them accurately, and especially their leader —the terrible Bel Demonio.

His face, as we have said, was concealed by the mask he wore ; but Mario noticed with surprise that his figure was slight and graceful. He sat his horse with ease, looking neither to the right nor left, but riding straight on, unmoved either by the shouts and yells of the black demons behind, or the numerous obstacles in the road, leaving the horse to choose his own path. As he passed Mario, he turned his head slightly, and waved his hand, but spoke not a word. Mario's eye glanced from the figure of this redoubtable and mysterious being to the horse he rode. Now Mario was a connoisseur in respect to horses, and could no more forget one he had once seen than if it were a human being. Imagine his surprise, then, when he recognised Lucifer in the horse he bestrode, the same on which Regina had a short time previously crossed the chasm.

“They must indeed be on intimate terms,” he muttered, “since they ride each other’s horse. Strange mystery ! How long has she known this Bel Demonio ? The girl is unfathomable. I am inclined to think she knows much more about this man or fiend than she chooses to own.”

Bel Demonio and his followers had now disappeared, and the sound of yells and shouting faded away in the distance.

A sudden idea seemed to strike Mario. Instead of following, as he at first intended, he turned his horse's head back again, and spurred him up the defile at the utmost speed the rough nature of the ground and the steep ascent would allow of.

Arrived at the chasm over which Regina had so boldly leaped, he dismounted, and fastened his horse to a bush which grew near the brink.

“ Bel Demonio is away. I will cross this gulf and fathom the mystery, and see who or what he is, and where he resides.”

These were his thoughts, and accordingly he commenced a careful examination of the locality, with a view to find some means of crossing. To leap it like Regina was next to impossible—beyond the power of his steed, and the attempt would be foolish rashness.

He walked along the edge of the precipice till he arrived at the side of the defile, which here rose nearly perpendicularly. Then he walked back to the other side, making close scrutiny for a path or any means of descending, and so reconnoitring the opposite side. But his search was futile. Every where there was a sheer and perpendicular descent from the brink down to the mist and darkness beneath. He was almost inclined to relinquish the attempt, when his eye fell on a withered tree stand-

ing close to the brink. He shook it, and found it would require but little to cause it to fall.

He glanced across the chasm. Could he but cause the tree to fall across, a natural bridge would be formed, over which he might pass.

Mario carried in his girdle a small hatchet or tomahawk, and by the aid of this the tree was soon felled, and thrown across the chasm. The task of passing across was both difficult and perilous ; but his eye was clear, his nerves firm, and it was accomplished in safety.

Mario Vitelli, not without some trepidation and misgiving, advanced to the hut in which Regina had disappeared. He perceived a black board over the door, and at first thought it had formerly been some mountain-hostelry, and that this was the sign ; but when he read the inscription thereon, he was undeceived. This inscription ran as follows :

“ DEATH TO THE MAN WHO ENTERS HERE !

“ BEL DEMONIO.”

“ Death to the man who enters here !” Mario repeated to himself. “ This brigand-chief has rare audacity, to put forth such an edict in the Abruzzi, where Andrca Vitelli reigns supreme.”

Looking more closely at the placard, Mario next discovered, nailed above it, three human hands—one was a skeleton, the other in a state of decay, while the third was that of a Negro.

"These, then, are the right hands of those who, prompted by curiosity, have dared disobey the audacious edict. Verily, this Bel Demonio lords it with a high hand. Shall I enter? It must not be said that a Vitelli dared not enter where he pleased in the mountains."

Still, though Mario was brave as steel, an inward dread and shrinking deterred him from entering, and he stood for some time on the threshold, undecided.

There was no door, and the interior of the hut was only concealed by a curtain of matting, which fell to the ground.

Mario looked up at the three hands nailed over the door, and shuddered.

The black hand was quite fresh, and could only have been severed from the body a day or two, at most.

"Doubtless," thought Mario, "it is the hand of one of his black followers, who, suffering imprudence to overcome discretion, penetrated into this forbidden place, and paid the penalty with his life. I wonder what horrible mysteries and terrors this curtain conceals. I will see."

Mario then reached forth his hand, and partly drew aside the matting.

It was not without a feeling closely allied to terror that he gazed into the interior of the hut.

His eye wandered around the place, and saw nothing. The room was bare, containing no article

of furniture whatever, except an oil lamp, which cast a flickering glare on the dark obscurity.

Presently, his eye getting more accustomed to the dim light (for there was neither window nor any other opening except the narrow door), he noticed a niche, which seemed to form the commencement of a passage leading from the farther end of the hut to the mountain.

He soon discovered that over this there was also an inscription. It ran thus :

“ ENTER, AND MEET DEATH !”

He could now distinguish dimly at the end of this passage an inner room, which seemed as though it lay behind a mist or cloud. A red light occasionally flared up and then went out again, as though it were the uncertain glimmer of a distant furnace.

“ I will enter,” said Mario to himself. “ I fear no mortal, and challenge Bel Demonio to award the punishment he threatens.”

Then, nerving himself for the undertaking, he entered the hut, and let fall the matting behind him. Now that the light of day was thus excluded, the dim glare grew more distinct, and Mario perceived it came from a chamber at the end of a long narrow passage. There, too, he perceived that the appearance of mist was caused by thick curtains hung across, which, though not perfectly opaque, yet rendered all beyond vague and indistinct.

Mario remained standing for some time at the

entrance to the passage, uncertain whether to advance or retreat. His eyes becoming accustomed to the light, or rather obscurity, could now begin to take in the general outline of the apartment at the end of the passage. He could see the glitter of gold and the sheen of crimson velvet. Arms, too, he could perceive—carbines, spears, and swords—arranged as a trophy on the wall opposite.

Evidently this retreat of Bel Demonio (if such it were) was luxuriously furnished. He could also discover, strewn about or hanging to the walls, various articles of female attire; and a lady's hat with a white plume lay on what appeared to be a table in the centre.

All this Mario noted by the fitful, flickering light, which blazed up for a moment, casting a crimson glow on all around, and then faded out almost completely.

But though all this gave evidence that the place was inhabited, no sound broke the stillness of the mountain solitude. He could hear the sound of his own breathing, and the beating of his heart.

Otherwise a silence as of the grave reigned around.

Resolved to penetrate this mystery, Mario, grasping a pistol, stepped boldly into the passage.

No sooner had he taken the first step, than a gong sounded loud, deep, sullen :

“ Boom !”

The long, deep sound rolled on, filling the place

with its hoarse reverberation, and then again all was silent as the grave.

Mario paused. The solemn sound struck terror to his heart. It seemed as though it were his funeral knell for daring to slight Bel Demonio's mandate.

The deep noise of the gong told him that, though he saw no living thing, he himself was watched, and his very movements noted. Though loth to relinquish the task he had undertaken, he yet paused in indecision, and thought within himself whether he were not rushing on certain death.

While he yet paused, and when the last echoes of the gong had died away, a faint sound struck his ear. It was like the clatter of arms, as though muskets or carbines were being brought to the "present" as noiselessly as possible.

Any one less brave and determined than Mario Vitelli would have been intimidated by this, and would have sought safety in flight from so terrible and mysterious a place.

But on him this had a contrary effect.

"Forward!" he muttered to himself; "to retreat is as dangerous as to advance."

Then he boldly went forward.

No sooner had he taken the first step, than again the deep-toned gong boomed forth, and instantaneously there was utter darkness.

The flickering, flaring, uncertain light disappeared as if by magic, and he was left standing alone and bewildered, in black obscurity.

Then he fancied he heard a sound like the rustling of dresses—a rushing sort of sound—low, subdued, suggesting the idea of bodies flitting rapidly, almost noiselessly, about him.

Mario's heart sank within him, for he now felt that other than mortal agencies were at work.

A cold sweat broke out on his brow, and it was with tottering limbs he groped his way by the wall of the hut back to the door.

He lifted the matting, and passed out into the open air and the light of day.

Then he sat down on a piece of rock, and proceeded to think on the strange sounds and the mysteries of the mountain-hut.

He looked around him : all was unchanged ; no living thing was in sight, nor did any sound break the deep silence.

There was the chasm which he had bridged with the fallen tree ; there the hut behind, which rose on the steep mountain.

He again read the inscription :

“ DEATH TO THE MAN WHO ENTERS HERE !

“ BEL DEMONIO.”

Suddenly a thought struck him.

“ I have entered, and am not dead. Bel Demonio is false to his word ; 'tis but a braggart's boast. Again will I enter, and this time examine thoroughly this place. No jugglery of sounding gongs and extinguishing lights shall daunt me.

First, though, I will thoroughly examine the locality, and provide means for a light."

Mario then rose; and breaking a dry branch from a resinous pine-tree, to use as a torch, should occasion require it, he proceeded to investigate the neighbourhood of the hut.

He went round behind, thinking to find the mountain-path up which he had heard Regina gallop after her disappearance into the hut.

To his surprise, he found that the hut was built so close up to the mountain that the back almost touched it.

There was no path whatever.

The rugged mountain-side rose sharp and sheer, as far as he could see, on either side.

He walked first a couple of hundred yards to the left, then the same distance to the right; but no path up the side where even a chamois could find the least hold was discernible.

He rubbed his eyes, and almost fancied he was in a dream. But no; there stood the hut, running back close to the mountain.

A vast pile of rocks and rubbish had accumulated at the rear, apparently having fallen or been hurled down from above. Indeed, the back of the hut was almost buried in this heap, which rose nearly as high as the roof.

Mario then walked round to the front of the hut, and stood in nearly the same line of sight as when Regina disappeared. He thus satisfied himself that

by no possibility could she have issued from the hut, or gone to the right or left, without his seeing her.

"Then," he concluded, "there must be a path which I have not been able to discover."

Again he walked round to the rear, and closely looked for any thing which could by possibility be construed into even the roughest and rudest bridle-path.

But in vain.

"It is not possible that her horse could have mounted that steep ascent," he thought; "and yet it must be so: there is no other way."

Mario again sat down, and strove to account for all these mysteries.

A half-hour passed, and he still sat there buried in deep thought. Then, apparently convinced of the hopelessness of thus solving the mystery, he rose to his feet.

"Now for a second essay. I will get to the bottom of this, or perish in the attempt."

He was provided with flint and steel, and could, at any moment, light the torch he held in his hand.

This time he did not hesitate about it, but walked boldly up and drew aside the matting. He paid no attention to the three dead hands on the warning placard, but walked straight in, and let fall the matting behind him.

Scarcely had he done so, than he heard the clatter of hoofs, and the same wild cries and shouts as when Bel Demonio first appeared at the head of his troop.

But though he could hear them, he was unable to decide from whence these sounds proceeded. He felt sure it was not from the other side of the chasm, whence he had himself come. The sound seemed to proceed from the mountain at the back, and appeared to approach nearer each moment.

Once again Mario Vitelli left the hut, and looked around in all directions, hoping to discover the authors of the cries and shouts, which now appeared quite close.

However, he could see nothing; the road up which he had come was clear, as far as he could see, nor could he discover any living thing, look where he would; and yet the sounds seemed quite close, apparently not more than a few hundred yards' distant, at the most.

Soon, however, it was evident that the sounds receded, until once again all was silent.

"Bel Demonio and his band have returned by a path known only to themselves. It must lead from the Devil's Horn, behind the mountain. There is no path hence, and to reach this place a long round is necessary. Bel Demonio is away. Again I will, in defiance of his audacity, penetrate the hut, and solve the mystery as to whither Regina has gone."

These were Mario's thoughts as he again advanced to the hut, and threw back the matting in the doorway.

No sooner had he entered, than he at once struck a light and lit the torch. Then, grasping it in

one hand, his sword in the other, he walked boldly to the entrance of the passage, and proceeded down it.

Again the hoarse boom of the gong.

Mario, in spite of his determination, paused, and listened awe-struck to the solemn echoes of the sound. The red light flickered and glared in the corner at the end as before ; and, as before, no signs of life were apparent.

Mario took another step forward, and again the dull thunder of the gong fell on his ear, this time louder, and, as he thought, more threatening in its tone.

It was at this moment, and when he was again about to advance, that Mario saw a figure hastily cross the room—the figure of a man, dressed in black, and wearing on his face a mask.

Mario at once recognised the figure as that of Bel Demonio himself.

“ Bel Demonio !” he cried ; “ stay, be you man or fiend !”

But the figure disappeared as suddenly as it came. Mario bounded forward with the intention of entering the chamber, and bringing the mysterious stranger to bay.

Scarcely had he gone half a dozen paces, than he received a violent blow full in the chest, which hurled him back, and sent him prone to earth on the floor of the hut. At the same time the torch was dashed from his hand, and, as the light in the

chamber also vanished, he was left in utter darkness.

Bruised and half-stunned by the force of the blow, it was some time before he could collect his thoughts to think from whence it had come.

He had seen nothing, absolutely nothing ; and yet, beyond all question, he had received a blow sufficiently violent to hurl him back some dozen yards.

No mortal hand could have dealt it : that was the conviction which pressed itself on his mind.

Nevertheless, Mario, though alarmed, was not daunted. A stubborn, sullen resolve possessed him to penetrate, at all hazards, into the chamber. Accordingly, though stiff and sore from the violence of the shock, he raised himself from the ground, groped for the torch, and having found it, set about striking a light. This accomplished, he again grasped his sword, and boldly advanced down the passage.

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERIOUS MISSIVE.

BEL DEMONIO and his band galloped swiftly on, heedless alike of the steep descent and the uneven road. It was evident their horses must have been well trained to the work.

Half an hour's hard riding brought them to

the Devil's Horn, where the horses and arms Regina had obtained from Andrea Vitelli were waiting.

Bel Demonio held up his hand, and instantly all pulled up their horses, and awaited their chief's commands.

Bel Demonio, beckoning the foremost of the black horsemen, who appeared to act as lieutenant under him, pointed to the horses and arms, and then back towards the mountains.

This appeared to be at once understood, for instantly the man gave vent to a few hoarse, guttural words, and the horses, with the arms and ammunition, were instantly seized by the band, who commeneed to lead them up the mountain by the path they had themselves descended.

There were twenty horses, and the band consisted of twenty-one men, so that after each man had taken charge of a horse thicre was still one left unoccupied.

Bel Dominio beckoned this man to him, and, producing a letter, handed it to him.

Then for the first time the mysterious bandit spoke.

The voice was soft, musical, mellow—like the sound of a clarion.

“This to the Marquis Campirelli.”

That was all. The black touched his forehead with his hand, bowed deeply, and immediately galloped off.

Then Bel Dominio turncd his horse's head, and followed the troop up the mountain-road.

* * * * *

The *château* of the Marquis Campirelli was about a mile distant from Spoleto. It was charmingly situated on the banks of the Nera, and surrounded entirely by gardens and pleasure-grounds.

Every luxury which wealth could command was to be found at the *Château* Campirelli, for the gay nobleman of that name was very wealthy, and had, moreover, a refined taste, and a full appreciation of the delights and luxuries which gold could procure. The marquis was young, handsome, and fond of pleasure ; so it is not strange that his house should be thronged by the *élite* of Italy. Beauty, rank, wit, talent, all met under his roof, and partook of his princely hospitality.

On the day of which we speak, a large party of ladies and gentlemen were visiting the young noble. The courtyard was filled with carriages, many of them bearing the arms of the noblest Italian families.

The gardens were profusely ornamented with statues, fountains, flowers, artificial grottoes, luxurious seats, and fish-ponds,—and, in fact, nothing was spared to render the place a second Eden.

The Marquis Campirelli, accompanied by a few intimate friends, strolled around these noble grounds, and, listening to the admiring comments of his guest, looked with pride on his splendid possessions.

Rich, young, handsome, and popular—what more

could a man want to render his happiness complete? Many were the envious glances and thoughts bestowed on the fortunate possessor of these blessings ; and more than one pair of bright eyes beamed with pleasure and approval on the handsome young noble. There were, indeed, few ladies in Italy who would, if asked, refuse to become the Marchioness Campirelli. But the marquis was proof against all the soft glances so lavishly bestowed on him ; and so far as the fair and lovely women whom he met in society were concerned, he was heart-whole.

And yet the marquis was in love. He had seen a vision of beauty : a dark, flashing dream of loveliness, which enchain'd his senses and bewilder'd his imagination.

The marquis had seen, and fallen desperately in love with, Regina, the mountain-queen.

The bandit's nice, the Amazon of the hills, held captive the heart which half the noble ladies in Italy had tried to win in vain.

Regina, with her flashing dark eyes, her queen-like carriage, haughty aquiline features, and bright, mocking smile, was always before him. Waking or sleeping, even as he strolled around his own noble grounds, and listened to the melting strains of the most accomplished musicians wealth could obtain, the voice of this mountain-girl yet rang in his ears, and drowned the refrain of the band.

Sunk in a deep reverie, he strolled around, not hearing or heeding the conversation of those about him.

A servant in gorgeous livery approached, followed by a tall black man wearing a white cloak, and carrying a huge crooked sabre. All looked on this strange apparition with curiosity, not unmixed with alarm.

“ This man arrived on horseback, my lord, and by his signs (for he cannot or will not speak) intimates that he is the bearer of a letter which he will deliver to none but you.”

These were the words with which the servant introduced the stranger.

The marquis, aroused from his reverie, looked with astonishment on the strange being before him.

The black held out a sealed letter, which the marquis took and opened.

An exclamation burst from him involuntarily :

“ Bel Demonio !”

“ Bel Demonio !” repeated those around him, recoiling in horror.

Some of the ladies screamed, while all gave vent to exclamations of alarm. And not without reason ; for on several occasions this audacious being had sent a missive to inform his destined victims that on the following night their houses would be attacked and burned, and themselves and followers murdered.

And Bel Demonio had uniformly kept his word.

But this was not a missive of that kind. It ran thus :

“ I am requested to inform you by Regina, niece of Andrea Vitelli, that she proposes to wait on you at your château to-morrow. She requests that all

your guests shall be dismissed. She sends thismissive by me, as the readiest means of communication. Send back my messenger in safety, or dread the vengeance of

“ BEL DEMONIO.”

The marquis was very pale when he had finished reading this short note.

“ See that the bearer of this note has every refreshment he may need ; give him a purse of fifty ducats, and let him go.” Then turning to his guests, he said, “ Ladies and gentlemen, it is with real sorrow I have to make the following request, and trust that it will not be construed into lack of hospitality. I expect visitors to-morrow on most important affairs. For reasons of their own, they do not wish to see company. Therefore, I am reluctantly compelled to request that you will postpone your visit to another occasion.”

Shortly there was a great clatter of hoofs and rolling of wheels, and before night all the numerous guests had taken their departure, and the Marquis Campirelli had the great *château* to himself.

CHAPTER V

THE SECRET OF THE HUT.

WE left Mario Vitelli the second time about to force his way down the mysterious passage, in order to explore the other room of the hut.

Again, as before, the gong boomed forth ; but,

invoking his patron-saint, the young man strode boldly on.

Suddenly he heard something whistle past his ear and strike the wall of the hut beyond with a great crash. He turned, and saw a large fragment of rock shivered into atoms. It had been hurled at him by invisible hands.

With a cry of rage, he rushed onwards. He sees a female form run across the room, hears the rustle of a dress, and the next moment is clasped in the arms of *Regina Vitelli*.

“ Back, Mario! back, or you are a dead man!” she cried, endeavouring to drag him away. “ ‘ Death to the man who enters here!’ Did you not read the placard?”

“ Loose me, *Regina*! I have sworn to penetrate and discover the secret of this accursed place.”

“ No, no; it is death to attempt it. Mario, dear Mario, hear me.”

But in spite of her struggles, the young man still passed on, holding the torch in one hand, his sword in the other.

Mario still endeavoured to press forward, and it was only by passionate entreaties and clinging tightly to him that *Regina* prevented his forcing his way on.

“ Mario! dear Mario! do not be so mad! Have mercy on me, if you have no fear for yourself. Remember, it is destruction to us both if you enter there—death sudden and terrible. Oh, Mario, spare

me ! I am too young to die, and it is hard to meet death through you."

Spite of himself, Mario was softened by the passionate appeals of his cousin. Still, however, unwilling to yield, his stubborn nature urged him to press forward. He took another step. Then Regina started away from him, and stood with clasped hands gazing horror-stricken, as though she momentarily expected the earth to open and swallow him up.

A singular sound now broke on his ear ; it resembled the clicking of machinery, or the simultaneous cocking of many muskets.

" Mario ! Mario ! pause !" she cried, in frantic tones. " Another step—one short step more, and no earthly power can save you."

He paused irresolute, for even his bold spirit was daunted by Regina's passionate assertions of instant death, and also by the mysterious noise. He glared sullenly forward.

Nothing was to be seen. All was silent as the grave, save the quick, panting breathing of Regina, and the beating of his own heart.

" Mario," she once more cried in husky tones, " at least yield me this. Leave this terrible placee for but five minutes ; let me speak to you outside, and then enter if you will."

Seeing his hesitation, she advanced, and seizing his hand, almost dragged him from the hut.

A tempest of emotion swept over her heart, and pale and beautiful as a statue, she felt almost faint-

ing. Mario, seeing her deadly pallor, supported her, and said: "Regina, my poor Regina, you are ill—you are faint."

"No, Mario dear, I shall be better directly. Great heavens! you do not know how terrible a fate you have but just escaped."

"Did I not love him," she thought, "all would now have been over. But I could not, will not, see him perish, my heart's idol." Then she leaned her head on his shoulder, as though seeking support.

"Regina, you are better now," he said; "remain here. I will enter alone."

All the stubborn determination of his father now possessed him. The hot blood of the Vitellis raged through his veins.

Again she threw her arms around him, and pointed to the inscription above the door:

"DEATH TO THE MAN WHO ENTERS HERE!"

"Bel Demonio never yet broke his word."

"Death! I do not believe it. This is but mummery and child's play. You, Regina, entered in safety, and so will I."

"But I am not a man. The inscription says:

"DEATH TO THE MAN WHO ENTERS HERE!"

"No matter. 'Tis an idle mockery, and at all hazards I will enter."

She flung herself passionately before him.

"You shall not."

“ I will.”

“ Mario Vitelli, if you are obstinately determined to seek your death, I cannot prevent you. Pause for one minute, and draw on one side. Listen : back ; quick—draw on one side. Bel Demonio is about to give a token of his power.”

Again the mysterious clicking sound is heard.

Regina almost dragged her cousin on one side, and stood with outstretched arms pointing to the doorway of the hut.

But one brief moment elapsed, when the matting covering the doorway was violently dashed on one side ; a rushing, roaring sound was heard in the air ; and, hurled by unseen hands, a huge fragment of rock flew forth, passed within a few feet of them, and then was dashed into a thousand fragments against the mountain-side, at some thirty or forty yards' distance.

“ Now, Mario, do you believe me ? We should have been crushed to pieces had we stood in a line with the door.”

Mario walked to the place where the huge boulder had struck the cliff.

“ No mortal hand hurled that rock,” he said, examining some of the fragments. His voice was solemn, and he no longer wore that look of reckless defiance and stern resolution on his handsome face. “ Regina, I am satisfied. I dare do all that mortal may, but care not to cope with beings who hurl huge rocks as though they were but pebbles.”

"Thank Heaven for that, Mario!" cried Regina joyfully. "Now retrace your steps, and wait till I join you at the Devil's Horn."

"And you, Regina? Whither are you going?"

"No matter whither; I must bid adieu to Bel Demonio, and get my horse."

"Bel Demonio! ah! and after this evidence of his superhuman power, will you place yourself at his mercy? Do you not fear this terrible being?"

"He is not terrible to those who do not refuse obedience to his mandates. I have no fear, Mario. Go! I will rejoin you in half an hour at the Devil's Horn."

Regina watched Mario make his perilous way across the chasm bridged by the tree, and then re-entered the hut and disappeared.

Mario watched and listened for some time, but all was silence and solitude. Then he mounted his horse, and rode slowly down the mountain.

Regina passed rapidly down the passage, raised the curtain, and entered boldly, and then threw herself on a couch in this mysterious chamber, and lay for some moments, her hand pressed to her heart, as though suffering an acute pang.

"Had I loved him less," she murmured, "he would have paid for his rash folly by his life. Ah, Bel Demonio, you are indeed terrible!"

Not long did she thus lie, however; for having somewhat recovered, she started to her feet, pulled

a sort of bell-rope hanging from the wall, and advanced to one end of the chamber covered with heavy crimson tapestry.

A gong again sounded, and Regina, lifting the tapestry, vanished behind it.

A half-hour later she rejoined Mario at the Devil's Horn, and both rode together back to the castle of Andrea Vitelli.

Mario said little on the road, but seemed lost in thought and speculation as to the terrible mystery he had endeavoured in vain to penetrate.

CHAPTER VI.

LOVE AND JEALOUSY.

WHEN Regina and Mario arrived at the castle, they found that Andrea Vitelli had, as was his frequent custom, sallied forth, without notice or warning, at the head of a large troop, for a foray in the plains.

The gentle Alma, as usual, was in a great state of trepidation and alarm. These expeditions, frequent as they were, to her timid mind never lost their terrors. The wounded brought in after some of Andrea Vitelli's desperate affrays belied his reassuring words to her that there was no danger. Then, too, the wounded men, whom she made her special care, told of the dead left on the field, and of those unfortunates who fell into the hands of the

foe, and whose fate was a long rope and a short shrift.

There was yet another reason why the blue-eyed Alma sought the look-out turret, and watched long and anxiously for the return of the expedition. Her uncle, in answer to her inquiries, had told her that Mario would join and make one of the party. It was, then, with mingled feelings of grief and joy, that she saw Mario and Regina leisurely approach down the mountain-road.

A thrill of joy shot through her frame, for she knew he was safe.

A pang of jealousy immediately followed it, for he was in company with her cousin—Regina, the peerless, the haughty, the beautiful ; “Regina, the mountain-queen.”

Perhaps Mario discerned her fair figure watching from the turret; for after putting his horse up, and giving some orders, he sauntered up and seated himself by her side.

Alma was pale and anxious-looking; but, casting a timid glance on the young chieftain’s face, she perceived that he was even more gloomy and cast-down.

“Cousin Mario,” she said presently, and not venturing to look him in the face, “you look grave —nay, more than grave. Has any thing happened ? —any ill news ?”

Mario affected to treat her words lightly, and replied :

"Sweet cousin Alma, I may retort, and ask what brings the clouds on your fair face?"

"Ah, Mario! have I not cause enough? Will our uncle, your father, never lay aside the sword, and forego his vengeance? Will these desperate frays and fights in the plains never cease? Shall we never have peace?"

"Never, Alma. My father will never sheath the sword so long as Hercules Vitelli, the murderer of his father, lives."

"'Tis a terrible life—a life of war and bloodshed. How many widows and orphans already has not this dreadful *vendetta* made? how many maimed men and mourning friends? how much misery and rapine have not even the innocent suffered?"

Mario did not reply, and there was a silence of some minutes. Presently she glanced again timidly in his face, and noted that the same gloomy, perplexed expression still had place there.

"Mario," she said, "something is on your mind; you fear something, or some evil thing has befallen?"

Mario rose to his feet, and strode up and down the confined space of the turret.

"A Vitelli never fears," he cried angrily. Then he again marched up and down, taking no further notice of his gentle cousin.

Presently, however, his heart seemed to smite him for his abruptness to poor Alma, who turned sorrowfully away, and seemed to feel the bitter words

deeply. He halted suddenly, and placing one hand on her shoulder, said :

“ Alma, do you believe that the Demons of Hell are ever allowed to visit earth ?”

She crossed herself piously, and murmured :

“ Heavens, Mario ! what do you mean ?”

“ Mean !” he said ; “ I mean—Bel Demonio.”

A faint cry escaped her.

“ Bel Demonio ! ha ! what of him ?”

“ I have been up the mountains to seek his retreat.”

“ Mario, you terrify me !” she cried in unfeigned horror. “ What have you to do with the mad demon, or he with you ? Holy saints protect you !”

He again paced about the turreted, as if unwilling or unable to reply. Presently, however, as though the thoughts of his bosom must find vent, he said :

“ You know, Alma, that Regina requested from our uncle twenty horses, twenty carbines, and some ammunition ?”

“ I heard something of it,” she said. “ But what has that to do with Bel Demonio ?”

“ Alma,” said Mario solemnly, “ Regina is in league with Bel Demonio ; the horses and carbines were for him.”

Alma started to her feet, pale as death, and trembling in every limb.

“ Mario ! what mean you ? Regina in league

with that foul fiend, whose very name carries terror in its utterance ! Regina ! my sister ! 'tis impossible. You but mock me."

" Nevertheless it is true," he said, folding his arms.

She looked inquiringly into his face for a few moments, as if waiting for him to speak.

Lifting his eyes to hers, he met that appealing, anxious glance.

" Alma, strange, terrible, incomprehensible as it may seem, what I am about to tell you is true. Regina knows this Bel Demonio, has seen him, is intimate with him."

" Mario, it cannot be true," —her large blue eyes dilating with horror ; " you deceive yourself."

" Alma, I swear to you, by the holy Cross, that I am not deceived. I myself, by Regina's request, accompanied her with the men and horses to the Devil's Horn. There we left them, and she and I rode on up the steep defile leading to the Eagle's Nest. She led me up a path, if path it can be called, I had never before traversed. The sides were steep, almost precipitous, and the road—such as it was—strewn with huge boulders, which seemed as though they had been hurled from the heights above on an advancing foe. Shortly we came to the hideous chasm, its sides ragged, perpendicular, its bottom hid in mist and darkness. This Regina, mounted on the black horse Lucifer, given her by Bel Demonio himself, leaped without a moment's hesitation.

The horse, like the giver, must assuredly have an infernal origin. Though no coward and no mean horseman, I would not have attempted so daring afeat. Beyond the chasm there was a hut, the back of which stood close up to the mountain, partly concealed by piles of rock and rubbish ascending higher than the low roof. Above the door of this hut there was a placard ; above this placard were nailed three human hands, one a crumbling skeleton, another in the process of decay, a third—and this the hand of a Negro—fresh and bloody, as though just stricken from the arm. These hands, Alma, were the hands of those who had perished for daring to disobey the mandate on the placard. There was no door, the entrance was solely concealed by a matting or screen; and apparently there was nothing to prevent any man on that side of the chasm from entering the hut, except the audacious words on the placard."

Alma (who had listened enthralled to Mario's strange narrative) exclaimed eagerly, " And those words were—?"

" *'Death to the man who enters here !'* and underneath, the signature ' BEL DEMONIO.' Regina, leading her horse, entered, notwithstanding the mandate above the door, and I returned towards the Devil's Horn by her directions. I had barely gone half-way, when I heard the sounds of galloping horses and terrible cries and shouts behind me. I drew on one side, and then, with whirlwind speed, Bel Demonio himself, with his band of Negroes, rushed

by. I resolved to return, and in his absence solve the mystery of the hut."

Then Mario proceeded to relate to his eager and horrified listener all the events which took place, and with which the reader is already acquainted.

Alma felt bewildered, terrified, by this strange recital, and hastened to seek Regina.

"Oh! Regina!" she exclaimed to her cousin, whom she found in her own chamber, gazing absently from the window out on to the picturesque landscape, "what terrible things Mario has been telling me! Can they be true?"

"I suppose, you little silly," replied Regina, "he has been telling you that I have seen Bel Demonio. There is nothing so very terrible in all that."

"Oh! Regina, do not say so. Then the deep mystery of the hut; the strange sounds and sights Mario witnessed; the placard; and, above all, the three human hands nailed there?"

"Ah, bah!" said Regina pettishly, and playing carelessly with the little silver-mounted pistol she wore. "What is there so wonderful or terrible in that? Bel Demonio does not choose to be intruded on by those whom he has not invited; so, like a determined fellow as he is, he puts up a placard to that effect, and, like a man of his word, carries into effect the sentence threatened to those who dare disobey."

"And is it possible, Regina, that you are not afraid to trust yourself in the power of this fiend?"

"Afraid! no. Why should I be? Bel Demonio, to those whom he loves, is gentle as a fawn; and me, Alma, he passionately adores."

Regina shot a quick glance at her cousin, to see the effect of these words.

Unmitigated astonishment first had place on Alma's fair features; but this was quickly succeeded by another expression, not so easy to decipher. It might have been satisfaction or confusion.

"And you, Regina," asked Alma, "it is not possible you can feel any thing but horror—at most, indifference—for this terrible being?"

"Indeed, I hardly know, Alma; Bel Demonio is a glorious fellow; handsome, courteous, accomplished, brave. But so is cousin Mario; and though perhaps not so elegant in manner or so refined, there is much in Mario to challenge admiration—love. Do you know, Alma, I like the stubborn, determined spirit of our cousin—so quiet, yet so courageous—so strong, yet so gentle? Ah, yes," she murmured, as though to herself, "Mario, dear Mario, you are indeed my favourite."

Though affecting to speak carelessly, thoughtlessly, Regina closely watched Alma's face.

She saw the colour rise from bosom to brow, and could not fail to observe the young girl's agitation and embarrassment.

"She loves him, she loves him," thought Regina; "but though she loved him ten thousand times as much, she shall never possess him. Besides, he loves

her not ; I feel sure it is I upon whom he has bestowed his affections."

" She loves him, she loves him," thought Alma ; and her heart felt sad and heavy. " Alas, for my dream ! Doubtless he loves her. Who could resist the queenly Regina, so brave, so witty, so beautiful ? How can I hope to rival her in his love ? How can my poor face, which at most is but pretty, compare with Regina's glorious beauty ?"

Thus thinking, Alma rose and left the room, wishing to hide her agitation and melancholy.

Though deeply wounded and heart-sore, her gentle nature was incapable of ill-feeling or anger towards her beautiful cousin. Till the conviction was forced upon her that Regina also loved Mario, she knew not how deep and passionate was her own affection. Therefore it was that, without repining or bitterness, she sought her favourite secluded spot, the eastern turret, and there gave way to her grief in tears.

Seated in an embrasure, and leaning over the parapet, her fair young face half buried in her hands, she did not notice a light footstep approach her, and started when a hand was laid on her shoulder.

" Alma, dear Alma, what ails you ? Why those tears ?"

It was the voice of Mario, and his the hand softly resting on her shoulder.

Blushing, confused, tearful, she knew not what reply to make. She would not tell a falsehood ; she

could not own the truth, that it was in utter hopelessness of his love that she wept.

"Come, Alma dear," he said, drawing her gently towards him ; "why this grief ? Who has vexed you ?"

Scarce knowing what she was doing, she yielded herself to him, happy only to be held in his arms for one brief moment.

Her head was soon nestling on his shoulder ; her soft hair brushing, her warm breath fanning, his cheek ; her tears falling on his breast.

"Alma, dear Alma, will you not speak ? Have I offended you ? Are you angry with me ?"

"No ; oh, no, Mario ; you could never offend me."

"Then cheer up, my sweet mountain-lily ; dry your tears, and look me in the face."

Finally she obeyed, and raised her soft blue eyes to his.

He drank in that deep, heavenly gaze for a moment or so, and then clasping her yet closer to him, bent down, and passionately kissed her lips.

"Alma, my sweet one, I love you."

Delirious with joy, she half returned his embrace ; her eyes languished and drooped before his ardent gaze ; and tremblingly, feebly, timidly, she sought to release herself, and yet wished not to be released.

Oh ! the bliss of those few short moments ! Alma, in that time, seemed to live an eternity of love. Her wildest dreams of happiness were ful-

filled, for had not Mario passionately told his love ? Could she doubt him, while yet his kiss burned on her lips, his arms enfolded her ?

"A pretty amusement, indeed—a charming amusement ! Pray do not let me interrupt this interesting love-passage. 'Tis charming, really!"

'Twas the voice of Regina ; and if ever a voice rang with passion and mortification, clear and silvery though it were, then did Regina's.

Alma hurriedly released herself from the close embrace of Mario, and, burning with shame, hid her face in her hands.

Mario also started back, and, though somewhat confused, essayed to put a bold face on it.

"Ah, cousin Regina, is that you ?"

Regina stood at the head of the steps leading to the turret, her dark eyes flashing, her cheeks flushed with anger. The little gray cap with the eagle's plume had fallen off, and her hair, partially escaped from the golden net, floated over her shoulders, and seemed to form a frame for the splendid picture her head and bust presented.

Beautiful — gloriously beautiful, she looked, as she thus stood, glancing with those flashing eyes of hers from one to the other.

Mario could not but own and feel the effect of that marvellous beauty. He could note her bosom heave and fall with emotion, and saw how her hand played dangerously with the little silver-mounted pistol.

Then the fact dawned upon him that Regina—the peerless Regina, the mountain-queen—had bestowed her love upon him. Though he had just declared his love to her cousin Alma, he could not but feel proud, and perhaps his heart fluttered, as, gazing on the splendid beauty before him, he thought that her heart was his. Then came back the thought of Bel Demonio, and he wondered what could be the nature of her connection with him.

Regina was the first to break the silence. Masking her anger as well as she could :

“ Truly, Mario, you make good use of your time. And you, Alma, timid and modest though you affect to be, can yet lie in a man’s arms, and press your lips to his. Doubtless this is not the first love-passage between you ; your chambers are not far apart : perchance the modest Alma has been in the habit of leaving hers unfastened.”

Alma coloured crimson at these bitter and unmerited words, and stung to the quick, replied :

“ You wrong me, Regina. It is cruel, it is unsisterly of you.”

“ Regina, shame on you !” cried Mario indignantly. “ How dare you thus falsely taunt Alma ! Were you a man, you should eat your words. As it is, I demand—”

“ Brave Mario !” said Regina satirically ; “ why do you not threaten and storm ? I am but a girl, you a strong man.”

“ A truce to this, Regina. What you witnessed

between Alma and myself was but a sisterly embrace I found the child crying, and sought to console her ; that is all."

" Ah, bah ! a pretty tale !"

" Mario, where have you been ? Girls. to your chambers, and let me see or hear no more of you !"

It was the stern, loud voice of Andrea Vitelli, the bandit-chief, who had returned, and sought his way to the turret.

" Mario, hasten to sound the tocsin ; get all the men in. By the thunder of Heaven ! blood shall flow like water ere to-morrow night. I have been attacked by this accursed Bel Demonio."

Regina gave vent to a slight scream.

" By Bel Demonio, uncle ? impossible ! He is our friend."

" I tell you it is so, girl. On our return, we fell into an ambuseade. Four of our men were killed ; and many—among others. myself—saw Bel Demonio's black band with the white cloaks."

" Impossible, uncle ; it could not be. Did you yourself see any of those blacks ?"

" I saw one ride away at full speed ; some of my men saw others ; and one fellow declares there were at least twenty."

" But did you not wait to ascertain ?"

" I waited, and received a bullet in my shoulder for my pains. As for the men, they fled like sheep before the wolf at the cry of 'Bel Demonio !' It seems the belief prevails that he is more than mortal."

—a fiend of hell. Ha, ha, ha !” the bandit laughed grimly. “ By the thunder of Heaven ! I will put his demonship to the proof by roasting him alive. He won’t mind that, if he comes from down below. Mario, see that all men without the castle-walls are at once assembled. Look up the arms, cast more bullets, and prepare for hard work.”

“ Uncle, dear,” said Regina, clinging to the grim chieftain ; “ you are never about to attack Bel Demonio ?”

“ Am I not ? I am, though; and, by the thunder of Heaven ! I’ll make him rue the day he set up his flag in the Abruzzi, where Andrea Vitelli is alone acknowledged lord.”

When Andrea Vitelli swore his favourite oath, Regina knew full well that no earthly power could turn him.

She was as pale as death, and seemed to tremble with excitement. Bewilderment, terror, all seemed to have place in her features.

“ Attacked by Bel Demonio !” she murmured. “ Holy saints ! what mad folly is this ? It is impossible, as I know ; but how to undeceive him ?”

“ Uncle,” she said, addressing the bandit-chief, “ when do you propose the attack ?”

“ To-morrow morning, at daybreak. So now away to your chambers, girls ; I must see to the arms and defences of the place.”

“ To-morrow morning, at daybreak,” murmured Regina ; “ this is terrible. At all hazards, I must be

before him. I must escape from the castle ere the drawbridge is lowered for the night. The Marquis Campirelli—I must see him ; then on to the Eagles' Nest." These were some of the conflicting thoughts which had place in the mind of Regina, as she sought her chamber.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COMPACT.

THE Marquis Doria Campirelli reclined lazily on a *fauteuil* in the gardens surrounding his palace. He was a tall, handsome young man, with an air at once intelligent, bold, and distinguished. His attire was rich and costly, and the care which he had evidently bestowed on the adornment of his person might warrant the suspicion of coxcombry and effeminacy. He was quite young, and had it not been for the silky moustache which shaded his upper lip, he might have been taken for under twenty.

Thought had not apparently troubled him much ; but he looked as if he had the power within him to will and do great things, either for good or evil. His bright, careless gaze scanned the landscape, while his fingers, white and taper as a woman's, played with a cigarette. Leaning back as he was in the garden-chair, it was difficult to guess his height ; but even his lazy, indolent attitude revealed a marvellous grace.

It was evident he expected some one, for he every now and then pulled out a small jewelled watch and consulted it. Presently he began apparently to get impatient, for he rose from his reclining position, and commenced pacing up and down the carefully laid-out walks of the pleasure-grounds.

“*Corpo di Bacco!*” he muttered. “Is this mountain-sylph but fooling me? Was the message she sent me through Bel Demonio a false one, only meant to deceive me? By the soul of my mother, if such was her intent, she has succeeded; for assuredly I shall have trouble to make peace with some of my visitors for the abrupt manner in which I dismissed them.”

Then, after a few more turns, his thoughts took another direction.

“No; she is wild and wayward, but I do not think her likely to indulge in such a foolish prank. I would give half my possessions to win that girl. She might well grace a coronet. Her beauty is matchless—ravishing. Not a lady in all Italy can compare with my glorious *Regina*; her wit so bright and sparkling, her every movement so full of grace and *abandon*. *Regina*, my sweet, my beautiful, why do you not come?”

Scarcely had he given vent to these thoughts in half-muttered words, when the sound of a horse’s hoofs was heard in the courtyard. Then he heard a sweet female voice say imperiously:

"Show me into the presence of your master, the marquis. I am expected."

"'Tis she!" he murmured, a flush of joy mounting to face and brow. "I knew she would not deceive me."

A servant conducted her down the avenue, to the part of the garden where he had left word he should be found; and when within a few paces, at a signal from his master, retired.

"Regina! my beautiful, my peerless Regina!" he cried; "I began to fear you had forgotten your appointment."

Then he knelt, and gallantly kissed the lady's hand.

"You had no right to think such a thing, marquis. Regina Vitelli always keeps her word, for good or for evil."

There was a tone of *hauteur*, of offended pride, in her words, as though she liked not being doubted.

"Pardon, sweet lady—a thousand pardons. On my knees I will sue for it, if you so will it."

"No, no, marquis," she replied, laughing; "you will soil those beautiful pink-silk hose of yours."

He fancied there lay in the words a slight sneer at the elegance and costliness of his attire.

"Nay, Regina, if it will please you better, this gay court-suit shall give place to buckskin and cuirass; this jewelled rapier to a worthier weapon."

She looked in his face, and noticed the flash of his fine eyes as he said this.

"Ah! is it so, Sir Marquis? We will see pre-

sently. I shall put you to the test; then let us see how you perform these fine promises you make so deedly."

"By heavens, Regina! for one kiss from your sweet lips, I would go through hell-fire, and challenge Satan to combat."

His words were vehement; but despite their bombast and exaggeration, she knew that the young nobleman was her devoted slave, and doubted not he would even comply with the extravagant demands she was about to make.

"Come," she said, "let us take a stroll round these delightful gardens of yours. Ah! it must be glorious indeed for you, who are rich, young, handsome, and a marquis."

Regina sighed slightly as she spoke.

"And you, Regina—are not you young and handsome?"

"Young? yes; and people tell me I am handsome," she replied, playing carelessly with her riding-whip.

"Regina," whispered the young nobleman, bending over her, and gazing full into her eyes, "you are, as you say, young and beautiful—gloriously beautiful! Why should you not be rich, and a marchioness?"

She raised her eyes—those melting, flashing eyes of hers—to his, and looked in wonderment.

"Would you wish to be so, my mountain-queen? You would, I am sure, grace a higher station."

"Ah, bah!" she cried pettishly; "you but mock me, my lord."

"Regina, may my tongue blister, if ever it mocks you or is false!"

Then he again stooped and whispered other words, which again caused Regina to give vent to a pettish exclamation, and the marquis gently placed his arm around her slender waist.

Though she struggled to release herself, and said, "For shame, my lord!" the attempt was so feeble, and the tone of voice so far from angry, that the gallant Campirelli felt himself justified in retaining his arm in its charming position.

It is not wonderful that the pulse of the young nobleman beat high, that his cheek burned, and his hand trembled on the slender waist it encircled, for assuredly Regina was ravishingly beautiful; but when to this wondrous beauty was added the *piquante* charm of her manner, the thousand restless fascinations, and the conscious glances of the dark eyes she brought to her aid, then, indeed, it would have been miraculous had he acted otherwise. The softening sun of Italy cast a yellow light on the landscape, bathing the hills in glorious purple tints, deepening into blue in the distance. The only sound which broke the stillness was the murmuring of their voices, and the wash of the river as it flowed on at the extremity of the garden. The Marquis Campirelli grew yet warmer in his language, and his arm clasped her fair figure closer, as

the minutes sped on, and the evening deepened into twilight.

As for Regina, she said but little, merely deprecating his ardour, and occasionally laughing a musical little laugh at a speech more extravagant than ordinary. The Marquis Campirelli was a true son of Italy, land of sunny skies and fiery passions. Love with him was a fierce frenzy ; and he now felt so intoxicated by the beauty and charms of the mountain - queen, that he would have surrendered wealth and rank to call her his.

His brain was on fire ; his heart beat furiously, as he felt hers bounding against his hand.

“ Regina, Regina, my queen, my love ! have pity, and cease your laughing and jesting, and tell me that you have a little love for me. Do not drive me to despair.”

“ Ah, bah ! marquis. You gallant noblemen are all fair words and fine promises to us mountain maidens.”

“ Regina, I swear—”

“ A fig for your oaths !” cried Regina, as she laughingly freed herself from his grasp. “ Now, marquis, I will just put your devotion to the test.”

“ Any test, any ordeal you please, Regina,” cried Campirelli, who felt inclined to throw himself at her feet, and embrace her knees ; “ any thing it is in the power of mortal man to do, that will I do. Say but the word, Regina.”

“ What word ?” she asked provokingly.

"That you will love me ; or if you cannot love me, at least that you will permit me to love you."

A strange smile flitted over Regina's features, and she paused for a moment or so before replying.

"Listen first to what a proof I will put you. You are brave?"

"I hope so."

"You love me?"

"I swear it most solemnly. I would risk my eternal salvation for one loving glance from your bright eyes."

"And you say you will undergo peril for my sake?"

"Name it, Regina, and trifle with me no longer," he cried passionately. But she, seeming to take delight in torturing him, paused for some time before she proceeded.

"You have heard of Bel Demonio?"

"The mysterious mountain-chief, who people say is an evil spirit? Yes."

"People are fools. Bel Demonio is no spirit. You have heard of him and his band?"

"Much, too much of his ferocity and cruelty. Besides, did not one of his hideous Arabs bring me the message from you?"

"True; I had forgotten. Well, the trial to which I am about to put you relates to this Bel Demonio."

"I do not shrink from the task, though you bid me tear the wolf from his den."

"Gently, my friend, gently ; your speech is running away with you. Bel Demonio is to be attacked to-morrow, shortly after daybreak."

"Ha ! and you wish me, in order to prove my love, to join in the attack on this rival of your uncle to the sovereignty of the Abruzzi ?"

Regina, who had been seated on a low garden-bench by his side, now rose to her feet. Her eyes seemed to dart fire, her cheek flushed, and her whole frame seemed to dilate proudly.

"Not so, Marquis Campirelli," she said ; "my commands are these—"

She pointed with her riding-whip to the distant mountain-peak known as the Eagle's Nest.

"Yonder is the home of Bel Demonio. Join his band ; take the oaths, the slightest infraction of which is certain death ; then come to me, and claim your reward."

The Marquis Campirelli was brave, as we have said ; but as he heard her words, and gathered their import, his cheek paled, and his eye fell before her piercing glance.

"Ha !" she said, after a few moments had passed in silence ; "you shrink from the ordeal ?"

He raised his eyes, and said proudly :

"No ; I accept it, and shall not fail to claim the reward. That reward is to be—what ?"

"Whatever you please to claim, Marquis Campirelli."

The marquis fancied there was a certain signifi-

cance in the tones of her voice. Perhaps, however, it was only fancy.

His eyes gleamed brightly as he replied :

“ Once again I say, I accept the conditions. For how long a time must I swear allegiance to this Bel Demonio ? and what is the nature of the services I am called on to render ?”

“ The time—twelve months. As for the nature of the services, you will have to swear to reveal none of the secrets of the band ; to be loyal and true ; instantly to obey any order brought you, no matter by whom, so long as he or she has the secret sign and pass-word ; to make war whenever you are bidden to make war ; to befriend whomsoever you are bidden ; to slay whomsoever you are bidden. To-morrow, you will be required to be at a place I will take you to, with a hundred men mounted and armed. Bel Demonio will come to you, conduct you to his secret abode, and administer the fearful oath of the fraternity. Come, marquis ; your answer ?”

“ You have already had it,” he replied resolutely. “ I am your slave ; command—I obey.”

A slight cry of pleasure, not unmixed with surprise, broke from Regina. Possibly she had not counted on so easily gaining her point.

“ Now, sweet Regina,” said Campirelli, advancing eagerly towards her, “ give me an instalment of my reward. Nay, do not shun me. Let me hold you in my arms one brief moment, and imprint one kiss

on your lips, and I am yours to command for this or any other enterprise."

"Hold, my lord! one moment," cried Regina, retreating before him, and laughingly keeping him at bay with her riding-whip. "There is one thing more—one more request I have to make of you."

"What more, Regina? Have you not demanded enough of me?"

There was a reproachful tone in these words of his.

"Nay, marquis, 'tis but a loan I am about to beg of you."

"A loan!" he cried joyfully. "Nay, say rather a gift. Ask what you will, Regina; be it half my fortune, it is yours."

"No, marquis; it is only a loan I require. You know you have a little villa about a mile from Spoleto? It stands quite alone, and in the small grounds surrounding it there are grottoes and caves, communicating with tunnels and subterranean passages, and all sorts of curious places. It is dreadfully dismal, and out of repair; but it could be made such a charming place with a little care!"

"Why, Regina, what mad freak possesses you now? What on earth do you want with the Villa Campaniola? for such it is called, I believe."

"Ah, yes—the Villa Campaniola; I had forgotten. So you won't give it me?" she added in a bitter tone, at the same time turning her head away.

"Not give it you, my jewel ! Ay, though it were not mine, and cost half a million of ducats in the purchasing."

Her eyes dancing with joy, her face beaming with smiles, she turned towards him.

"Then I may have it—and you will have it put in order for me—all to myself ? And you will warn all your people, under pain of death, never to dare intrude ?"

"Yes, yes, my darling Regina ! Surely you do not doubt me ?"

"Oh, you dear marquis ! now I feel so happy."

"Now, Regina," said the young man, again eagerly advancing, and catching her in his arms, "fulfil the first part of your promise."

This time she made no resistance, but suffered him to strain her in a close embrace, and even turned her lips towards his to receive the kiss.

It is certain that if the marquis was not slow in availing himself of the opportunity, he was very slow in relinquishing his hold on the enchantress of the hills, and it was not before she had several times requested him to release her that he did so.

"Oh, you brute !" she cried pettishly, "I declare you have almost killed me. Never mind, I will forgive you, for the sake of the Villa Campaniola. You do not repent of your bargain ?" she said archly.

"No, no ; a thousand times, no."

"Then send for my horse, and we will see what Bel Demonio says to it."

"Bel Demonio! Are you, then, going to him now? And you said, *we*. How can I learn the result?"

"Ah, you stupid marquis! No, I am not going to Bel Demonio; but I am about to have a talk with him. Send for my horse, and I will show you his home."

"The marquis sounded a silver whistle, and when the liveried attendant hastened up in obedience to the summons, he ordered Regina's horse to be brought down.

It was now nearly dark, for the sun had long set, and there was no moon.

"Marquis," said Regina, while waiting for her steed, "do you see yonder peak of the mountain?"

She indicated with her riding-whip that known as the Eagle's Nest, whose dim outline could just be discerned against the sky.

"Yes; the peasants call it the Eagle's Nest. It is inaccessible; yet, nevertheless, strangely enough, they persist in saying that the haunt of Bel Demonio and his band is there."

"Be that as it may," said Regina, "Bel Demonio is there now, and will soon give a token of his presence."

The groom now came up, leading the horse, which, at a call from its mistress, came trotting up to her. Regina unbuckled the valise from the saddle, which she unstrapped, and took something therefrom.

The marquis watched her proceedings with great curiosity, as she went to a little distance, and seemed to be fixing something upright in the earth. Then he heard the sharp clicks of a flint-and-steel, and judged by the sparks that she was endeavouring to strike a light. More and more amazed at these extraordinary proceedings, he was about to approach her in order to discover her object, when, whiz! rush! a stream of fire shot into the sky; and then Campirelli knew that it was a rocket which Regina had sent up. He watched it attain its highest elevation, then burst, sprinkling around myriads of brilliant stars. As these slowly descend like a golden rain, and long ere they reach the earth, a second rocket shoots up into the heavens, bursts like the first, and flings around its fiery shower. A third fiery signal is in like manner despatched, the last expiring sparks of which having disappeared, Regina spoke:

"Now keep your eyes on the Eagle's Nest, marquis," she said; "we shall soon have Bel Demonio's answer."

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth, than from the distant mountain there shot up a jet of light, instantly followed by another, and yet another, so closely that all three seemed to burst at the same moment, the fiery stars and sparks mingling together as they fell, till all faded away.

"Your services are accepted, marquis," said Regina; "I will meet you to-morrow at the Devil's

Horn, one hour after sunrise, and will conduct you to the presence of great Bel Demonio himself. Assist me to my saddle."

Campirelli, powerfully impressed by what he had seen and heard, mechanically lowered his hand, into the palm of which she lightly stepped, and sprang into the saddle.

"Adieu!" Then is heard the clattering of her horse's hoofs, and the next moment the marquis is alone.

"Can all this be stern reality?" he murmured to himself. "Is it a dream? or does this enchantress deceive me with some potent spell? or does she mock me? But no; there is earnestness and fervour in those gleaming black eyes of hers. Regina Vitelli has purpose in all she does."

* * * * *

"Ha, ha!" laughed Regina, her eyes beaming with triumph and joy, "'tis glorious to be a woman, if only to befool these men. *Men!* there are but two in all Italy worthy of the name,—one is Mario Vitelli, the other Bel Demonio. Ha, ha, ha, ha!" Again a musical peal of laughter rang out on the clear night air. The hard road resounded with the thunder of her steed's galloping hoofs, and Regina tore on through the darkness, at a pace which few men would have cared to emulate.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BANDIT-CHIEF.

BEFORE daylight on the following morning, there was great noise and uproar in and around the castle of Andrea Vitelli, the bandit-chief. Horses neighed and pawed the ground, as though they sniffed the battle afar off; at intervals the great bell on the eastern turret pealed forth the war-toesin, and all who heard that dread sound knew that Andrea Vitelli was about to issue forth, and shrewdly prophesied that the next night would not be dark, although there were no moon; for the blaze of the burning *châteaux*, houses, and villages, which usually marked his track, would give light enough. Within the courtyard of the castle the clang and clatter of arms, as they were being burnished and buckled on, resounded; the ring of the steel ramrod as the carbines were loaded, the loud talk of the assembled desperadoes, and an occasional shout—*Viva Andrea Vitelli!*—sufficiently showed that some warlike movement was on foot.

As we have said, it yet wanted some considerable time to sunrise; and the courtyard was illumined by torches, stuck round on pillars, or waved aloft by brawny bandits, who, in their joy at the prospect of another raid into the plains,—a prospect, they knew, fraught with the pleasures of rapine and plunder,—were too excited to remain still, and were walk-

ing to and fro, hither and thither, shouting, gesticulating ; not forgetting frequent libations from the barrel of rich red wine placed in the courtyard by the orders of Andrea Vitelli.

“ Way, there ; way ! Make way for the Lady Regina !” is now the shout ; and, indeed, ’tis not needless, for, mounted on her black horse Lucifer, she trotted from the stable out into the courtyard, right through the centre of the crowd, turning neither to the right nor to the left, but pressing straight on, with the single sentence, “ Make way, men !” in her shrill tones, which, though sweet and musical, were heard above all the din and uproar.

She rode straight towards the drawbridge ; the portcullis was still lowered, the drawbridge up.

“ Up with the portcullis ; lower the drawbridge,” she said, in peremptory tones, to the men in attendance.

“ My lady, it is the captain’s orders,” said the man respectfully, “ that the drawbridge be not lowered till day—”

Regina dealt him a sharp blow across the face with her riding-whip. “ Silence, and obey, you hound !” she cried passionately.

The man still hesitated, for he had received his orders from Andrea Vitelli himself, and knew not what to do.

Regina, without a moment’s hesitation, drew forth one of her little silver-mounted pistols, and, cocking it, levelled it at the man’s head : “ Obey, or die.”

Her lips were firmly knit, her beautiful eyes

gleamed fiercely on him in the red torchlight. All the band knew Regina's determined, passionate nature ; and the man slowly raised the portcullis, muttering to himself :

“ *Corpo di Bacco!* a man can only die once, and Andrea Vitelli can only shoot me. He will not come forth for half an hour yet, and at least I have gained that time, for *she* would have shot me as I stood—ay, like a dog.”

No sooner was the portcullis raised, than Regina turned to the man in charge of the drawbridge chain. “ Lower the drawbridge !” was the sharp command.

It was instantly obeyed, for the man had seen quite enough of Regina's determination.

The chain creaked and groaned as the heavy bridge descended. Lucifer, sniffing the morning air, pawed and pranced impatiently as though longing to be off and away. No sooner did the bridge reach its bed on the other side of the moat, than Regina gave a little cry to Lucifer, who neighed with joy, pricked his ears, and, bounding forward, galloped over the wooden bridge, and the next moment both horse and rider were hidden in the darkness of the night.

A great shout rang forth from the hoarse throats of all in the courtyard, in which even the keepers of the portcullis and drawbridge joined : “ *Viva Regina!* ”

That shout roused the attention of Andrea Vitelli, who was giving instructions to his son Mario and the lieutenant in the great hall. He came forth

on to the balcony. His brow grew black as night as he noticed the raised portcullis and lowered drawbridge.

“Who has dared disobey my orders? Who has dared go forth? for I heard the clattering of a horse’s hoofs. Speak, you sentinel at the portcullis!” At the same moment he drew a pistol from his belt, and levelled it at the man.

“The Lady Regina, my lord; she did as you are doing now,—pointed a pistol at my head, and commanded me to obey her.”

Andrea Vitelli put back the pistol in his girdle, and gloomily returned to the great hall of the castle. Scarcely had he retired from the balcony, when the shrill blast of a bugle was heard without, and those on and near the drawbridge came rushing into the courtyard, crying, in accents of the greatest terror, “BEL DEMONIO! BEL DEMONIO!”

CHAPTER IX.

ANDREA VITELLI LEADS FORTH HIS BAND AGAINST BEL DEMONIO.

TREMENDOUS was the excitement and consternation among the crowd in the courtyard of the castle of Andrea Vitelli, when the alarm-cry, “Bel Demonio!” followed on the bugle-blast. The superstitious, ignorant desperadoes who composed his band would have faced death by rope or bullet unflinchingly,

but recoiled in terror at the very sound of Bel Demonio's name.

With most of them, this mysterious being was but a myth. And yet, though few had seen him, he was ever present in their imaginations. Marvellous and dreadful were the tales told around the watch-fire on the lone mountain, or the guard-room of the castle.

To these rude mountaineers Bel Demonio was the impersonation of all that was terrible. Not Satan himself could inspire them with greater terror ; and, indeed, the two were frequently coupled together, as though, if not exactly identical, at least very nearly related.

The uproar and clamour was deafening, and, to add to all, some one seized the rope of the great bell, and commenced ringing an alarm-peal.

Andrea Vitelli came bounding out from the great hall, where he had been engaged in conversation with his lieutenant and Mario, and, with drawn sword and flaming eyes, hurried out into the courtyard, and, striking right and left with the flat of his blade, demanded the meaning of the uproar.

But one cry reëchoed on every hand : "Bel Demonio ! Bel Demonio !"

"Fools, dolts, asses, cowards !" he shouted ; "what of Bel Demonio ?"

"Yonder, Captain ! out beyond the drawbridge. Bel Demonio himself."

Andrea Vitelli muttered an oath, and bounded forward.

“Mario, Luigi, follow me, and all who are not
cravens.”

Then the grim chief, grasping his good sword in his right hand, his left on the butt of a pistol, strode forward, and passing under the portcullis, hurried over the drawbridge.

The first gray tints of dawn had just begun to shine in the eastern sky, but all around the castle was wrapt in dark obscurity.

While yet Andrea, Mario, and the lieutenant gazed, again the bugle sounded its defiant notes. Following the sound with their eyes, all three discerned in the gloom a figure on horseback, at about twenty yards’ distance. It was too dark to distinguish his features. Indeed, they could discern nothing, except that it was the figure of a man, mounted, and wearing a long white cloak.

With the quickness of thought, Andrea Vitelli levelled his pistol, fired, and shouted to the others, “Fire! Shoot down the audacious scoundrel who dares thus insult me. By the thunder of Heaven! Bel Demonio or Satan himself, I care not.”

Then Mario and Luigi fircd their pistols, and Andrea Vitelli levelled the other, and was about to discharge it, when he discovered that the figure had vanished.

There was a silence of a few moments, and then Andrea spoke :

“So, so! this Bel Demonio thinks to intimidate and turn me from my purpose by his accursed

jugglery. He sounds his bugle without my castle-gates. We will see how he will carry himself when I appear outside his kennel in the hills." He replaced the pistol in his belt, and recrossed the draw-bridge, followed by Mario and the lieutenant. Hardly had he done so, than a shrill peal of laughter rang out. Turning quickly, with fury in his look, again for a moment he saw the figure draped in the white cloak ; then there was the sound of clattering hoofs, and before he could level and discharge his pistol the vision had vanished.

Gloomy, but withal somewhat pale, the chieftain looked as he reëntered the courtyard. He held up his hand to command silence :

" Men,—free-lances who serve under the banner of Andrea Vitelli,—a great insult has been put on your chief and on yourselves. The audacious brigand, Bel Demonio, doubtless hearing I was about to attack and root him out from his mountain-den, has dared, either in person or by an emissary, to appear before my castle-gates and sound a defiance. Doubtless, too, he calculated on the supernatural terrors with which the fears of the weak and the cowardly have invested him. I accept his challenge, and ere another sun goes down his head shall grace the walls. Speak ! is there a man among you so craven as to submit to such an insult to me and to yourselves ? No ! ' Death to Bel Demonio ! '—let that be our battle-cry ; this the day on which we rid the Abruzzi of him and his band."

“Death to Bel Demonio!” rang out from many throats ; but Andrea Vitelli noted that it was not shouted out heartily, also that some of his best men kept utter silence. He looked with astonishment on their lowering faces, faces which hitherto had been wont to beam with savage joy at the prospect of a fight.

“What means this?” he said to the lieutenant. “What ails Balbi, Matteo, and a dozen others? I note they seem to have no stomach for the task.”

“They say, captain, that this Bel Demonio is not of mortal guise, but an evil spirit permitted to roam the mountains, and that it is certain destruction to meet him.”

“A spirit! a demon! They think, then, the fools, that it is Satan himself?”

“Or one of his angels,” was the reply.

“So, so; we will meet him with his own weapons. Send for Father Ignatius.”

This was the priest of the castle, whose duties consisted in reading mass in the chapel, shriving the wounded, and performing the sacraments of marriage, baptism, and the funeral rites on the dead. For, be it known, notwithstanding the lawless, bloody life this band of free-lances, or rather outlaws, led, all were, or professed to be, devout Catholics, and contributed largely to the revenues of Holy Mother Church, even though those contributions were the fruits of rapine and murder.

"Holy Father Ignatius," said Andrea Vitelli, so soon as the priest appeared, "I have need of your services."

"Speak, my son; and if it be within the province of my office, you shall have my assistance."

"We are about to attack that fierce, lawless bandit, Bel Demonio. Too long have I borne his audacity in daring to range the Abruzzi without leave or license from me. There are many wild rumours about, to the effect that he is possessed by an evil spirit, even if he be not one himself. If it is not so, I and my brave men will easily defeat and bring him to punishment. In the other case, holy father, we require your assistance. You shall accompany us, to exorcise the foul fiend, and save us alike from his bullets or such supernatural weapons as he may employ."

Father Ignatius's countenance fell at this. Perhaps he had not perfect confidence in his power to preserve himself alike from bullets and spells.

"Not so, my lord," he replied. "I will furnish you with more potent means of defeating this Bel Demonio, be he, or not, as some say, an evil spirit. We have in the altar-chest of the chapel a collection of sacred relics, and among them a piece of the true cross. Each man who goes forth to combat with this being shall carry a relic; and furthermore, to insure him from the powers of darkness, I will cut off a number of shavings of the most holy cross. Then, be this Bel Demonio indeed a fiend from

below, neither bullet nor steel can harm you or any one who wears the sacred relic."

"Good Father Ignatius, your suggestion comes most opportunely, for I believe some of my fellows are infected with a superstitious dread."

Again Andrea Vitelli addressed his band :

"Men,—I am aware that reports are rife to the effect that this Bel Demonio (whom God confound !) is not a mortal man. I am always careful of the lives and welfare, spiritual and bodily, of my men, and would never order them to advance where I feared to lead. Is it not so ?"

"Yes, yes !" was shouted on all hands. "*Viva Andrea Vitelli !*"

"We are now about to attack Bel Demonio. If he is mortal, it will fare hard with him should he dare to resist the Lord of the Abruzzi and his brave band. If he be indeed immortal, or aided by the powers of darkness, the holy Father Ignatius has provided a safeguard."

Andrea Vitelli paused for a moment, and glanced his eye along the circle of manly faces surrounding him. He read in some a look of ardour and enthusiasm, in others doubt ; in all, curiosity to learn what manner of safeguard was this which Father Ignatius promised.

Andrea Vitelli continued :

"Each man will in turn proceed to the chapel, kneel bareheaded before the altar, receive absolution, and a most holy relic, as a spell against all evil

things. In addition, each man will be presented with a small piece of the true cross ; and no Catholic dare doubt the efficacy of this."

A loud and prolonged shout broke out at these words. Even the most sullen and disconeteuted brightened up ; and when the cheers subsided, the clash of arms might again be heard, as they were being examined and put in readiness.

Long before the last of the men had received absolution and the relic, the gray dawn in the east merged into twilight ; while Andrea Vitelli impatiently paced up and down, cursing the priest for his tardiness. In a few minutes the last man had been duly absolved, and reccived his chip of wood ; and long before the mists of morniug had been dissipated by the sun, who still lingered beneath the horizon, Andrea Vitelli, with a hundred and fifty of his best men, passed over the drawbridge. The horsemen struck up the mountain-road at a brisk canter ; those on foot followed more slowly ; while the rear was brought up by ambulanees (in case there should be any wounded), provisions, and ammunition. No sooner have they gone forth, than the drawbridge is hauled up, the portcullis lowered, and but for the solitary sentinel on the parapet pacing his monotonous round, the castle seems deserted.

Stay, not quite so ; for on the eastern turret a female figure may be discerned leaning over, and wearing a scarf. It is Alma Vitelli, who at that early hour has risen to wave a farewell, perhaps

for ever, to her cousin Mario and her uncle Andrea.

The gentle Alma's heart sank within her as she thought of the terrible errand on which they were bound—to attack the fierce and mysterious Bel Demonio in his mountain-fastness.

"Alas!" thought Alma, the tears streaming down her beautiful face, "my uncle and Mario are brave and skilful; but what can bravery and skill avail against the powers of darkness? and who can hope to contend with Bel Demonio and live?"

CHAPTER X.

THE MARQUIS THREADS THE MYSTERIOUS TUNNEL, AND MEETS BEL DEMONIO.

THE Marquis Campirelli seemed sorely puzzled after the departure of Regina. He had promised to meet her one hour after sunrise, with a hundred men, and he was then to be conducted to the presence of this fierce brigand himself. Campirelli, as we have said, was no coward, but he, like all others living on the plains or in the cities at the foot of the Abruzzi, had heard many terrible stories of Bel Demonio and his band. It was not more than a year since the name of this mysterious mountain-chief first began to be bruited about. But his fame spread abroad with marvellous rapidity; and though few could trace the wild rumours to a definite source,

Bel Demonio was assuredly the most terrible name in all Northern Italy.

The marquis thought on all this, and argued, "Surely there must be something of truth in all these reports. They say it is an evil spirit in mortal guise ; and if half the atrocities he is said to have perpetrated be true, his heart must be black enough for Satan himself. And yet, again, this may but be exaggeration. Regina has seen him, and declares he is not the hideous, cruel monster he is represented ; that he is but a free-lance, such as Andrea Vitelli, and terrible only to his enemies. Be that as it may, I have promised : Regina Vitelli is to be my reward. To the winds, then, with all priestly scruples or womanish fears !"

Having come to this determination, he hastened back to the mansion, and summoned his major-domo.

"Inform Captain Colorado I wish to see him immediately, and tell him at once to look up his men. I must have a hundred ready and mounted two hours after midnight."

"The captain has gone into Spoleto to the ball at the Palace Vitelli, your lordship." was the reply.

"Then despatch a messenger with a fleet horse. Stay one moment ; I will give you a note."

He took paper, and wrote hurriedly as follows :

"CAPTAIN COLORADO,—I require you to muster a hundred men, mounted and armed, by two hours,

or at the outside three, after midnight. Herein fail not, or seek another service than that of

“DORIA CAMPIRELLI.”

He gave this to the major-domo, saying, “See this is delivercd at once. It now wants three hours and a half of midnight ; that gives him six hours and a half.”

“But, my lord,” the major-domo returned, “to-day there are at the outside but sixty horses in the stables ; and I know that Captain Colorado has given leave to many of the men, and they are doubtless carousing about the town.”

“No matter ; the horses and the men must be had, or both you and Colorado will seek service elsewhere. You have money, have you not, of mine ?”

“My lord, I have just received the rents of your Campagna estates.”

“Money will procure any thing. See that you and the captain manage it between you.”

The man saw his master was not in a mood to be trifled with, and that he could not get so lucrative a post or so indulgent a master in all Italy ; therefore it is almost needless to say, the horses and the armed men were forthcoming at the appointed time. It is true that some of the men were not yet sober, and some ten or a dozen of the horses not of the best ; but the marquis was not disposed to be critical, and at three hours after midnight he led the way towards the mountains, followed by his retainers.

In those days, all nobles with any claim to wealth

or distinction kept standing bodies of troops—indeed, small armies ; many of the wealthier nobles keeping up a force of a thousand or more men, even in time of peace. Among these was Doria Campirelli ; but so seldom had he called for their services, except on occasions of show or state, that this sudden night-summons came like a thunder-clap on all.

But as, like the major-domo, they knew the marquis was liberal and indulgent, they did not fail to answer the summons. Each of the two hundred men he had brought with him to Spoleto, true soldiers of fortune, had sworn truth and fealty to him,—in fact, to make his quarrel theirs, without question or cavil.

They rode on in silence for some time ; but presently Captain Colorado, the commander of the men, ventured to ask on what errand they were bound.

“ You have heard of Bel Demonio ?”

“ Of Bel Demonio, the mountain-fiend !” said the captain aghast. “ My lord, surely we are not about to attack him ?”

“ No. I am going to meet him by appointment ; then join him in an expedition, whose nature I will explain by and by.”

The news soon got bruited abroad in the band, and though some were at first struck with horror at the very name, yet, when it was known that they were not to attack, but to fight on the side of Bel Demonio, their fears were somewhat allayed. Doubtless it was a terrible thing, they argued, to fight on

the side of an evil spirit, but nothing near so terrible as to fight against him. Then, the marquis had been so profusely liberal on the few occasions on which he had required their services for serious work, that no foolish scruples as to aiding and abetting the devil himself weighed with those hired cut-throats.

Certainly, had it been to fight against this Bel Demonio, every man would have absolutely refused. It might be a very righteous act to fight against Satan ; but, as a matter of choice, these gallant heroes preferred to fight on his side. And so they rode on to the Devil's Horn, not a word being said against the adventure, whatever it might turn out. Doria Campirelli reined in his horse on the little *plateau*, and gave the word to halt. He had not long to wait ; for shortly, ere yet the sun had mounted over the hills, Regina Vitelli appeared on her black horse. The marquis noted, as she rode up to him, and gave him her hand, that she looked wan and pale, as though she had not slept.

"Regina, my pride," he said, "you look weary and fatigued. Are you not over-exerting yourself?"

"No, my lord ; I have had a somewhat indifferent night. I shall be better presently. Order your officers to follow with the men about fifty yards in the rear. I will conduct you to where we are to meet Bel Demonio."

While yet she spoke, the distant clatter of hoofs might be heard, apparently also ascending the mountain.

"Hark!" said Regina; "do you hear any thing?"

"Yes; the sound of hoofs at a distance, and occasionally the faint note of a bugle."

Regina sprang from her horse, and falling on her knees, placed her ear close to the ground, and listened.

"'Tis as I thought," she muttered, as she hastily remounted her steed; "Andrea Vitelli is coming with his band. We must be off, marquis. Follow me."

Then she spurred Lucifer, and started off by a rough road which wound around the hill at a pace which, to any but a good horsewoman and sure-footed steed, would have been highly dangerous. Regina seemed quite familiar with the tortuous, rugged mountain bridle-paths she threaded, and passed on without troubling herself to see if the marquis was following, resting content with the sound of the hoof-falls as he and his men with difficulty made their way. It seemed, by the direction they were taking, that they were describing a wide circle; for whereas when they started the rising sun was in their faces, it was now nearly on their backs. The bridle-path they were threading did not ascend the mountain, but, on the contrary, seemed to slope gradually downwards, leading around the base.

Presently they arrived at the entrance of a narrow defile, which looked as if it had at one time been the bed of a mountain-torrent. The sides of this defile were perfectly perpendicular, and the

bottom, shelving upwards, strewn with huge rocks and boulders.

The sides, steep as they were, were covered with brushwood, and occasional ledges or platforms might be observed, which gave the idea of their being the work of human hands.

At the back of each of these ledges of rock there seemed to be a hollow or cave in the mountain-side, and altogether they were not unlike embrasures or portholes.

Arrived here, Regina held up her hand, as a signal to halt. The marquis rode up to her, and waited for her to speak. "Marquis Campirelli," she said, "I am going to inform Bel Demonio of your arrival. When you hear a bugle sound, you are to dismount, and lead your horse up the ravine, as you will find it too rough for riding. Before you have gone far, you will meet a tall black man, bearing a large sabre, and with a white cloak over his shoulders. Follow him, and he will conduct you to the presence of Bel Demonio ; give directions to your men to dismount and picket their horses : they will have to remain here perhaps an hour."

Doria Campirelli hastened to do her bidding ; and Regina dismounted, and leading her horse by the bridle, made her way up the narrow pass, and was soon lost to view.

The marquis also dismounted, and giving his horse's bridle to one of the men, commenced to explore the singular place in which he found himself.

The uneven, rugged bridle-path led close to the mouth of the pass, and appeared to go yet farther round the mountain; but when he walked on a little way, he found it stopped abruptly opposite a perpendicular cliff, such as those which bounded the chasm or defile on either hand. After a close examination, he could not but come to the conclusion that the path indeed terminated here. It then could only lead to the defile up which *Regina* had disappeared, and he inclined to the belief that it was solely used by *Bel Demonio* and his people.

Returning to where he had left his horse, he made his way a short distance up the pass, regarding with feelings of awe and wonder the perpendicular frowning sides of the mountain. As he did so, he felt convinced that he saw moving figures on many of the ledges with the caves or recesses at the back. While he yet gazed, and wondered whether indeed the apparently gloomy solitudes were peopled by living beings, perchance watching his every motion, the distant blast of a bugle fell on his ear.

It was the summons of *Bel Demonio*; and the marquis at once, nothing daunted, though somewhat pale, took his horse by the bridle, and commenced threading the difficult path up the defile.

Not without many stumbles and much trouble, he passed on for about a quarter of a mile, when he came to a quantity of brushwood which quite blocked up the way. Passing through this as best he could, he suddenly found himself outside the entrance of an

immense cavern in the side of the mountain. The mouth was about ten yards across, but he could see that it widened out greatly within. While yet he looked, a mounted figure emerged from the darkness, and drew up at the entrance. He recognised in the hideous black features, the curved sword, the gigantic stature, and the white cloak, the Negro whom Regina had told him he would meet, and who was to lead him to Bel Demonio.

The black, giving vent to a guttural sound, pointed up the cavern, and, turning his horse's head, entered. Campirelli mounted his horse, and unhesitatingly followed. The black went onward apparently with perfect confidence, though there were, as it seemed to the marquis, scores of dismal passages leading out of the cavern, branching in all directions. His guide, however, unhesitatingly selected one, and urged his horse up the slippery wet ascent (for these galleries seemed to slope upward into the mountain); and Campirelli, keeping his eye fixed on the white cloak, followed. Onwards, still onwards; no light beaming in on the dismal darkness, no sound breaking the solemn stillness save the noise of their horses' hoofs, and the monotonous drip of water from the roof.

Presently, however, the ground beneath them got drier, and it gave the impression as though sand had been sprinkled about for the purpose. By degrees, too, the gallery or passage widened out, and in the space of a few minutes, on winding a curve, a faint

red light was visible ahead. The black immediately stopped, and wound a blast again on the bugle. After a moment's pause, there came booming and echoing to them the deep, solemn tones of a gong, the light blazed up clearer and ruddier, and again his guide pushed forward.

Five minutes more brought them opposite a door-like opening, reaching from the ground to the roof, and shaded by semi-transparent curtains. Campirelli noticed, as he advanced, that cannon were planted on each side, their muzzles frowning ominously down the narrow way he had come. Also, he noticed running along the wall many tubes, about the thickness of a finger, the ends of which were primed with touch-paper. The marquis had sufficient engineering knowledge to be aware that these tubes were primed with composition, and that fire, being applied to one end, would quickly run along the whole length. In short, these tubes were evidently to communicate with and, when necessary, explode mines for the defence of the place. Campirelli noticed all this, and then boldly raised the curtain and passed in. He found himself in a small apartment, lighted by a burning taper. There was a couch here, except which the place was empty. The walls seemed hewn out of the solid rock, and immediately facing the entrance was a large wooden door, iron-bound and studded with nails. Suddenly this door creaked on its hinges, and opened ; a blaze of light poured in from the room beyond, and a figure stood before

him. It was that of a slender young man, of smaller stature than himself, dressed in black velvet, and wearing over his shoulder, in such a way as to conceal his figure, a large white cloak. The upper part of his face was hidden by a black-velvet mask, and a fringe of crape descended over his mouth. A pair of large dark eyes flashed from the two holes cut in the upper portion, and Campirelli could distinguish through the lace that the mouth was well and firmly cut, and was shaded by a very small moustache.

This personage was the first to speak : “ Welcome, Marquis Campirelli.”

The tone of the voice was melodious and pleasing, and had no tinge of harshness in it.

“ I believe I have the honour to address him who is called Bel Demonio ?” said the marquis in reply, and bowing.

“ The same. Do me the honour to enter.”

Then Bel Demonio stood on one side, and, with a graceful wave of the hand, motioned him to pass on.

Campirelli did so, and found himself in a large apartment, whose walls, like those of the other apartment, were of solid rock, in such places as they were visible— for nearly the whole were covered by rich and costly tapestry. Several chandeliers, with coloured glass shades, threw a rich rose-tinted light around.

Campirelli gazed about him as though, by an enchanted wand, he had been transported to fairy-land.

On all sides articles of elegance and luxury were piled in wild confusion, with jewelry, gold and silver vessels, costly mirrors, silks, satins, velvets, guns, pistols, small cannon, swords, daggers, armour, accoutrements, saddles, bridles, horses' trappings, and a thousand other incongruous objects.

Then the marquis turned his eye to the ornaments and pictures hung around the tapestried walls. His gaze was riveted on one large picture set in a plain ebony frame. It was well executed, and a thrill of jealous rage shot through him as he recognised the figures the artist had delineated. One was that of a young and handsome lady, seated on a black horse. By her side, leaning with one arm on the pommel of the saddle, stood a young man, dressed in dark clothes, wearing a small sword, a black-velvet cap, and a white cloak falling loosely over his shoulders. His face was almost effeminately handsome, but the softness of expression was redeemed by the thin, determined mouth, and the piercing dark eyes, which were bent lovingly on the face of the lady. Campirelli at once recognised in the picture *Regina Vitelli* and *Bel Demonio*.

Suddenly turning his eyes, he met those of this mysterious being fixed on his face, and he could detect a mocking smile on his lips beneath the lace which covered them. A tempest of emotions swept over his soul—love for the beautiful girl so charmingly delineated on the canvas, hatred of his rival, as he thought, mingled with passionate jealousy,

and an ardent longing to know what were the relations between these two.

Could they be brother and sister ? Impossible !

He was sufficiently acquainted with the history of both Regina and Alma to know that neither had a brother. Who, then, could it be ? A lover ? It must be so, and probably a favoured one.

While he turned these things over in his mind, Bel Demonio stepped quickly towards some curtains opposite the place by which they had entered, and, drawing them aside, pulled a bell-rope which hung there. This had instantly the effect of causing a gong to sound several times, and at the same moment a sliding-door moved silently open. Bel Demonio stepped through, saying only :

“ I will rejoin you in a few moments, marquis.”

Then the door closed behind him, and Campirelli was alone.

Alone !—at least, he thought himself so, but was undeceived when he turned his head, for he saw, standing upright and motionless at the place by which they had entered, the figure of the same tall black man who had conducted him there. He held drawn in his hand an enormous crooked sabre, and Campirelli, alarmed for the moment, started back and laid his hand on his sword.

The big Negro grinned hideously, and shook his head in token that no harm was meant ; and the young noble, reassured on that point, proceeded eagerly to question him ; but to all his questions as to where

he was, and what was the meaning of all he saw, the black only shook his head and grinned as before.

Suddenly the marquis thought of a means by which most men may be tempted. He pulled forth his purse, and counting out five hundred pieces in gold, held them forth. The Negro looked at them with avaricious eyes, and seeing this, the marquis added another two hundred.

“Who is that lady on horseback in the picture ? Tell me all you know of her, and her connection with your master, and this gold is yours.”

But though the black held out his hand for the money readily enough, nothing but inarticulate sounds came from him.

“Speak quickly; no one will hear you.”

In reply, the other opened his mouth, and displayed the mutilated remains of a tongue. Those whom he served had taken good precautions against his talking.

Doria Campirelli was for a moment horror-stricken, but quickly recovering himself, asked :

“Do you understand ?”

A nod of the head signified assent.

Then the young noble produced his writing-tablets, and handed them to the Negro.

“You can write ?”

A guttural sound and another nod signified “yes;” and after gazing around with a frightened air, he commenced marking rapidly on the paper. He had barely been occupied in this a minute, when a sound

in the other room caused him to thrust the tablets hurriedly away, and hold out his hand for the promised gold. Campirelli let it fall into his hand, and concealed the tablets in his vest, saying :

“ Mark you, my man, if I find the information you have here given me is false, or that you have been fooling me, I will myself inform your master of your having received my gold.”

The man looked terrified as he gathered the import of these words, but soon recovered his equanimity, and bowed silently, in token that, should his information prove false, he was willing to abide the penalty. The next moment Bel Demonio again entered by the sliding-door.

“ Now, Marquis Campirelli, will you have the kindness to follow me ?”

Campirelli at once did so, and found himself next moment in another room, not dissimilar to the one he had left. The door instantly and noiselessly closed behind him, and he was again alone with the mountain-chief.

“ You may need some refreshment, marquis,” said Bel Demonio in the blandest of tones, at the same time pulling a silken rope which hung from the wall.
“ Be seated.”

There were several couches in the room, and the young nobleman accepted the invitation, seated himself on one, and commenced a survey of this third room into which he had entered.

It was, as we have said, not unlike the first, with

this difference, however, that the door by which they had entered was quite invisible, and there was none at all opposite—simply a semi-transparent curtain, beyond which might be discerned a long, dark passage. This was the passage down which Mario was so rashly forcing his way when Regina rushed out and prevailed on him, by prayers and persuasions, to desist. This was the very room where he had seen the light burning, heard the sound of the gong, and from which issued that mysterious clicking noise that had so bewildered and alarmed him.

As he looked around, he too suddenly heard a sound as of machinery, and the next moment, to his utter astonishment, a table rose, as if by magic, in the centre of the room, laden with cold viands, fruits, and wines of different sorts.

Bel Demonio seemed to enjoy his amazement, and said :

“ This is how I receive my friends, marquis ; I will show you anon how I receive my enemies. Come, assist yourself.”

Campirelli partook sparingly of the refreshments and wine, which latter was of the most rare and costly description.

“ Your health, marquis,” said his strange host, pledging him in a goblet of wine.

Campirelli drank his in silence ; his heart was yet too full of distrust and jealousy to allow him cordially to pledge one whom he believed to be his rival.

“ And now, marquis, to business,” said his host,

so soon as the former had concluded his repast ; "you know wherefore you have come here ; there is yet time to draw back, if you so choose."

The voice in which he said this was calm, full of sweetness, and melancholy.

"No, I do not wish to withdraw ; but answer me one question—Who are you, and what are your relations with Regina Vitelli, who conducted me a part of the way here ?"

"I—I am called Bel Demonio," he replied, smiling through the lace of the mask ; "as for Regina Vitelli, she is a brave, enthusiastic girl ; she admires deeds of reckless daring; and so, having heard of the fame of Bel Demonio, sought him out, and became his friend."

"His friend!"

"His friend, and nothing more."

"I must, I suppose, take your word. I am ready to perform as I promised ; the hundred men Regina required of me are at the place where she left me. I am here."

"You are ready to take an oath not to reveal anything you may see or hear, nor to betray any of our secrets ? furthermore, you will swear solemnly to join us heart and soul for the specified time ?"

"I will."

"Then follow me to the chapel, and take the oath."

So saying, Bel Demonio rose, touched a spring, which caused the door by which they had entered

again to slide back, and leading the way, the door quickly closed behind them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ATTACK ON THE HUT.

THEY were not absent more than ten minutes at the most, and when the door again slid back and they re-entered the room, Bel Demonio still wore a smile on his lips, while Campirelli, though very pale, looked firm and resolute.

“ And now, brother Campirelli, I have shown you how I receive my friends; I will let you see the reception I give my enemies.”

The table had long since vanished, and the floor of the apartment was again level.

“ This chamber leads by a passage to a rude mountain-hut, without door or any other protection. But I had a placard placed on the door, inscribed with these words : ‘ Death to the man who enters here ! ’ Since that placard has been there, eleven men, impelled by curiosity, have endeavoured to penetrate here. All have perished save one, and he owed his life to Regina Vitelli, who did not allow him to enter. He was her cousin Mario, and I fancy she is in love with him.”

The marquis gave vent to an expression of jealous rage ; but not heeding it, Bel Demonio went on :

“ I will show you the sort of death they courted

and met. On entering the passage, a gong sounds thus,—and, touching a spring, the gong boomed out its solemn sound. “At each step, the gong again gives warning. If, however, the infatuated wretch passes on and enters the room, this is the result. Stand back, marquis—back, close to the couch.”

Campirelli did as he was told, and waited in breathless suspense for what should come next.

Bel Demonio reached his hand forth to the wall, and continued :

“The very instant the doomed man’s foot touches the flooring of the room, his fate is sealed.”

Then in an instant there was a tremendous crash, a cloud of dust or smoke, through which the marquis could not for a moment discern what had happened. But as the cloud cleared away, he saw before him, in place of what was the floor of the room, nothing but black vacancy—a hideous chasm. The whole floor, not only of the chamber, but also of half the passage, had vanished bodily ; and of course any thing standing on it must have been precipitated into the yawning abyss. Down in its gloomy depths Campirelli could discern a dim lurid light, but at a great distance, and could also hear the splash of water.

“What is that dreadful gulf ?” he asked in awe-struck tones.

“That is a natural chasm in the mountain, over which this hut has been built. At the bottom are

many subterranean passages useful to me. That light you see is from the forge, where our armourers work."

"And what became of the poor wretches who fell down there?"

"What became of them, my dear friend?" said Bel Demonio, smiling; "they were dashed to pieces!"

Campirelli shuddered with horror at the thought.

Bel Demonio reached forth his hand, and touched another small brass projection behind the tapestry. Then followed a groaning sound, and a huge framework of wheels, pulleys, and wood-work reared itself slowly up from the abyss, as though summoned by some enchanter from the infernal regions.

Campirelli gazed in astonishment at this extraordinary-looking machine, totally at a loss to understand its use or meaning.

"I am lost in wonder," he said; "explain the meaning of all this."

"That," said Bel Demonio, still smiling, "is a little engine of mine, which, on occasion, is capable of doing good service. We shall be attacked to-day; then, perchance, I may show you its use and powers for destruction. Hush!" he exclaimed suddenly, and listening attentively.

Campirelli heard a sound of shouting, and a noise like the felling of trees or hewing of timber.

Again he touched the spring; the monstrous engine slowly sunk back into the abyss; the floor rose

in two flaps like a trap-door, and all was again as when they first entered.

"Follow me," said Bel Demonio, as he hastened down the passage, and passed into the hut at the end.

He placed himself so that he could see through a small hole, not larger than that made by a bullet, in the strong wooden slabs of the hut-side, and motioned Campirelli to do the like at another hole of the same description.

The sight which met their gaze would have been alarming to any other than Bel Demonio, who, perfectly cool and collected, seemed to be provided against every emergency. At a distance of some twenty paces was the deep chasm (the same over which Regina had leaped, and Mario thrown his impromptu bridge); beyond that, some hundred and fifty armed men, their horses picketed a little distance off, were busily engaged in cutting timber, and throwing a bridge across the chasm; among them, encouraging to haste, was Andrea Vitelli.

"So, so!" murmured Bel Demonio; "you think to find us unprepared. Wait, my merry men, and Bel Demonio will give you a lesson you will not soon forget."

Then taking a bugle, which was strung around his neck, he blew a long, loud blast. For a moment or so, the workers at the bridge paused in surprise at the sound, which apprised them that, though they saw nothing, they were not unseen.

The bugle-note sounded by Bel Demonio was answered by another, at a considerable distance as it seemed.

"Good!" he muttered ; "it is well. I will give them five minutes."

The five minutes passed in anxious silence, the bridge being so far completed that several men had already ventured on it.

Then Bel Demonio again blew his bugle. This time it was answered by a ringing shout from many different directions. It seemed by the voices that the whole mountain was alive with hidden men. Next succeeded the rapid discharge of fire-arms, shouts and yells, and the thundering and crashing of huge rocks rolled down from the mountain behind on to the bridge and its defenders.

"Stand your ground, men!" shouted Andrea Vitelli ; "load and fire, some of you, while others complete the bridge. Five minutes more, and the chasm is spanned ; then we will unearth these rats, and let them taste of the vengeance of Andrea Vitelli. So ho, there ! stand firm ! A Vitelli ! Death to Bel Demonio !"

The men, inspired by the words of their chief, replied with a loud shout, and, vigorously returning the enemy's fire, worked with a will at the bridge.

But in proportion as their ardour increased, so did the furious yells of Bel Demonio's hidden men, the volleys of bullets, and the great rocks thundering down the mountain's side, plunging into the deep

chasm, many striking the bridge, killing the men, and destroying the work as fast as done.

All this time Bel Demonio remained perfectly calm and impassive, looking through the small hole with a smile on his handsome mouth.

Notwithstanding this warm reception, Vitelli's men, inspired by his example, fought so desperately and well, that in a few minutes some more of their number had passed the bridge, and proceeded to attack the hut itself ; here, however, they were met by a reception they had not dreamed of. Armed men suddenly appeared from behind the low building, and the volleys from the sharpshooters in the mountains were more deadly and frequent. Still, however, aided by fresh men, who continually crossed behind them, it is possible they might have made good a footing ; but from out the hut itself large rocks and stones were hurled, crushing all before them. Smoke and sulphurous flames burst from the roof ; and from which, too, vast fragments of rock shot up in the air, and fell on the heads of the attacking party. A deadly mephitic vapour shortly enveloped them, and in less than five minutes such of Vitelli's men as were not killed were driven back, and the bridge itself destroyed. It had been a desperate attack, and ended in a disastrous repulse.

Possibly Andrea Vitelli did not expect to find the foe so well prepared, or to meet so stubborn a resistance. Be this as it may, he handled his men most skilfully, encouraging them by words and ex-

ample to persevere, notwithstanding this repulse, to complete the bridge, and take the position by storm. There was one thing, however, which his eagle-eye noted, which gave him considerable uneasiness. Many of his men were killed by the fire and fragments of rocks, and many more wounded ; but although he kept a bright look-out, it was at rare intervals only that he could catch a glimpse of those who shot down his men and hurled the rocks. The foe were well concealed, and the puffs of white smoke spurting out all over the mountain alone guided him to their position.

Accordingly, not wishing to sacrifice his men uselessly, he called them off, resolved to make the attack in a different manner. Those who thought that he was about to give up the contest did not know Andrea Vitelli. He at once sent off a swift messenger to the castle for all the remaining force to come on at once. Two hours must elapse before the reinforcement could possibly arrive ; which interval Andrea Vitelli employed in throwing up a breastwork, behind which the materials for the bridge to be thrown across the chasm could be got together and roughly shaped. A brisk fire, too, was kept up from this shelter on the enemy's sharp-shooters, with whom Vitelli's men were now on equal terms.

Bel Demonio, whose eagle-glance nothing escaped, noticed this.

"Ah!" he said, "Andrea Vitelli is not to be

thus foiled. He has sent for reinforcements. The next assault will be more desperate. I much fear that he may succeed in throwing over a bridge, and gaining a footing this side. I could easily prevent it, if I chose, by killing him. My only fear is lest he should fall from some stray shot."

The marquis listened in astonishment to these muttered words.

" You fear he should fall—this man, who is your enemy!" he cried.

" He is not my enemy," replied Bel Demonio, with a tinge of sadness in his voice. " I bear him and his son no ill-will. I have strictly commanded my men to spare both him and his son. Here every bullet fired is marked ; and if either is killed without my orders, the man whose bullet did it, dies too. Not but that I would, and will, kill him," he added hastily, his eyes flaming fire ; " let him but rouse the devil in me, and he dies, though a thousand oaths bound me not to harm him. See now where he is. His life is in my hand."

He then produced a small whistle, and sounded it gently.

Instantly there stepped into the dark hut some score of shadowy figures, draped in white cloaks. Bel Demonio took Campirelli by the arm, and drew him on one side to make way for them.

" Level your pieces, and cover Andrea Vitelli," he said ; " but do not dare to fire till I give the word."

Then each of those silent ghost-like shadows

removed a small plug of wood, and inserting in its placee the muzzle of his pieee, took deliberate aim at Andrea, as he stood giving some direetions to those around him.

Though partially covered by the low breastwork, his head and shoulders were fully exposed ; little did he think, as he thus stood boldly out, that twenty deadly tubes were levelled at him at less than thirty paces' distance—levelled by sure eyes, the trigger pressed by steady fingers—and that but one word was wanted to end his mortal career.

Bel Demonio took a white handkerchief, affixed it to the end of his sword, and then drew aside the matting across the entrance of the hut, and boldly stepped out.

“A truee ! a truee !” he cried ; “I would parley with you, Andrea Vitelli !”

A tremendous shout, half astonishment, half terror, broke from all Vitelli's men.

“Bel Demonio ! Bel Demonio !” was again the cry ; and tremendous was the confusion created thereby. Some felt inclined to fly ; others seized their arms, and some few levelled their muskets.

“Let not a man dare fire without orders,” shouted Andrea Vitelli, striking up the muskets of those nearest to him.

One man, however, fired, and the bullet whizzed past Bel Demonio's ear. It could be observed, even through the lace of the mask, that he grew ghastly

pale. The deadly barrels of the white-cloaked shadows within the hut were all levelled full on the breast of Andrea Vitelli. Each man breathed hard, each finger touched the trigger, waiting but the word to send forth the leaden messengers of death. Campirelli also, watching through his eye-hole, momentarily expected to hear the word given, and see Andrea fall, pierced by many bullets.

Bel Demonio turned towards the hut, white and trembling with passion (for the ball had actually grazed his neck); the word "Fire," which should be the death-knell of the chieftain, was on his lips, when Andrea Vitelli drew forth a pistol, and levelling it at the man who had discharged his musket, fired, shouting :

"Die, dog! for daring to disobey orders."

These words, and the action, saved his life. Then he leaped on to the low breastwork, and cried, in a loud, threatening voice, "Who and what are you who dares beard Andrea Vitelli in the Abruzzi? What mean you by calling truce? do you surrender to my clemency?"

"They call me 'Bel Demonio,'" was the calm reply; "let that suffice. As to what I want, I would parley with you."

"Speak on; speak quickly, and to the purpose," was the stern reply.

"Andrea Vitelli, what want you with me or mine? Have we harmed you? — No! Do we threaten you with harm? — No! Then leave us

alone in peace; the mountain-ranges are surely broad enough and lofty enough for both!"

"By the thunder of heaven! thou art audacious!" shouted Andrea Vitelli. "Know you not that I alone reign in these mountains? No other shall dare plant even a foot here without my leave. I want none of your parleying. Either surrender, with all your gang, or I will find means to unearth you from your rat-holes!"

Bel Demonio was silent for a moment; and, falling back towards the hut, said in a low tone to those within, "Shoot me the man on each side of Andrea Vitelli, and strike the plume from his hat, when I give the word." Then he said, quite calmly:

"As you please, Andrea Vitelli. Perehanee, you may not find it so easy a task as you suppose. Lest you think I am but a vain boaster, I will give you a slight proof. Your life is in my hands. Nay, interrupt me not—your life, I say, is in my hands. The villains who stand on your right hand and on your left each raised his picce, although I bore a flag of truce. They shall die, and the plumes from your head shall fall. FIRE!"

This last command was to those within the hut, and was instantly followed by the loud report of twenty muskets. The men on either hand of Andrea Vitelli fell riddled with balls, and the chief's own plumed hat was struck from his head. He stooped to recover it, and lo! the plume had been shot away.

"Andrea Vitelli, know by this sign that your

life was, and is, in my hands, and that Bel Demonio is no vain braggart."

"It is Satan—Satan himself," cried many, in terror. "The shots came from no mortal weapons!" "The saints protect us!" "'Tis vain to contend against Bel Demonio!" These and many other cries fell on Andrea's ears, who himself was staggered by the terrible way in which Bel Demonio had proved the truth of his words.

Meanwhile Bel Demonio had gained the shelter of the hut, leaving Andrea Vitelli to brood over the death of the men on either side of him, and the convincing proof his enemy had given of his power.

Doria Campirelli had witnessed the whole of this tragic scene, and had noted the calm demeanour of Bel Demonio with admiration, mingled with wonder.

"And now, Marquis Campirelli," said the latter, on again rejoining him, "having, for the present, beaten off the attack, I may give you your instructions, and dismiss you. I know Andrea Vitelli too well not to feel assured that the cheek he has received will only make him more furious and determined to conquer. It will be necessary to read him a yet bloodier lesson ere he will forego the attack. You will join your men, and make your way, by the Devil's Horn, up the road by which Andrea Vitelli came, and, at a signal, will attack him in the rear. I will send a guide with you, who will, by signs, interpret the meaning of the bugle-calls I may

find it necessary to use. Come ; your horse awaits you without."

Then, amid the stifling smoke and sulphurous vapours still lingering in the passage, Bel Demonio led him back through the various chambers he had before passed, and out into the place where stood his horse, held by the same black who had conducted him thither. He mounted, and, following his guide, in half an hour rejoined his men. He at once gave the word to march ; and, the black leading, they retraced their steps to the Devil's Horn.

At first, Campirelli had felt some misgiving ; but now he entered into the affair with ardour. The mysteries and wonders he had been initiated into inspired him with a great admiration for Bel Demonio. This was increased by the courteous bearing of this strange being, and, above all, by the chivalrous manner in which he had exposed himself, and spared the life of Andrea Vitelli.

It was a romantic adventure altogether ; and, now that the marquis had witnessed the commencement, he was eager and impatient to carry it through, and longed to cross swords with Andrea Vitelli himself.

Bel Demonio had given brief instructions for his guidance before they parted. They were to the effect, that at a given signal he was to attack Vitelli in the rear, and, at another signal, to desist, retreat sonic half-mile, and allow the defeated enemy to pass unmolested.

CHAPTER XII.

THE REPULSE.

BEL DEMONIO was not wrong when he so positively stated that Andrea Vitelli would not thus give up, although so bloodily repulsed. While impatiently waiting for reinforcements, he busied himself in reconnoitring the position, preparing fresh materials for a bridge in place of that destroyed, and increasing the height of the breastwork, so as more effectually to shelter his men.

But though all was activity and energy on one side of the chasm, on the other, where stood the hut, not a sound was heard, not a movement was to be seen.

This deadly silence had in it something ominous, and it could not fail to exert a depressing influence on the defeated ; for did not the same deadly silence reign when first they advanced so confidently to cross the narrow gulf which separated them from the foe ? Each moment they expected to hear the bugle-blast, followed by the wild shouts of the black demons, and a storm of bullets.

But no such feelings had place in the breast of Andrea Vitelli. His own nature was capable only of hate, rendered yet fiercer by defeat. Many and bitter were the oaths he swore to take a terrible vengeance on this audacious upstart, who so con-

temptuously had spared his life. Impatiently he bent his eye along the rugged mountain-road, in anxious expectation of the reinforcements he had sent for. When at last he discerned the sheen of their arms glittering in the bright morning sun, he gave vent to an exclamation of savage joy. Leaping up on the breastwork, utterly careless of exposing his own person, he waved his sword as a signal for them to increase their pace, and at the same time shouted, "To arms, my men! Ready with the timbers! Here come our brave comrades! Death to Bel Demonio, and vengeance for the slain!"

The enthusiasm and confidence of their leader produced an effect on his men, and the shout, "Death to Bel Demonio!" was taken up, till the echoes in the distance flung it back as if in mockery.

Andrea Vitelli lost no time in marshalling his forces, thus augmented, for a second and decisive attack. He divided them into two bodies, one of which was to force its way over the gulf and storm the hut, while the other was to keep up a constant fire on its defenders and on the sharp-shooters, whose deadly aim made such dire havoc. All being in readiness, Andrea himself gave the word, and led the way. Till the moment when he placed his foot on the rude logs forming the bridge, a silence as of the grave had reigned around; then that silence was broken by a single sharp, clear note on a bugle, followed by a crashing volley. Fire

and smoke seemed to spurt out all around. There was not a rock nor a bit of brushwood whence did not come white puffs of smoke, followed by the sharp report and hissing bullet. Cries and groans, mingled with the furious shouts of the unwounded, succeeded this ; while above all might be heard the hoarse voice of the bandit-chief, shouting, “Forward! forward! A Vitelli! Death to Bel Demonio!” Thus shouting and encouraging his men, the bridge is safely passed, and the open ground in front of the hut gained. But now, above the rattle of the musketry, the sound of a bugle, apparently coming from behind the hut, is again heard. Amidst the din of battle it passes unheeded ; and though men are falling right and left, Andrea, followed by his son Mario, still leads on, and presses forward towards the door of the hut.

“Now we have them ! A Vitelli ! Forward, my men, and the day is ours ! Death to Bel Demonio !” is his battle-cry, as, sword in hand, he madly presses on for the entrance. Hitherto no shot has been fired from there. The wooden slabs forming the walls are riddled with bullet-holes ; and yet, save the one discharge, which shot the plume from the chief’s head and killed the men by his side, no sign of life came from that rude pile. But just as Andrea, followed by Mario and some half-score others, were within half a dozen paces of the entrance, a shower of rocks and stones sent the greater number, bruised and bleeding, to earth.

Andrea and Mario were among those struck. The former was the first to rise, the blood flowing from a cut on the temple.

"Forward! forward! Death to Bel Demonio!" is still the fierce chieftain's hoarse cry. But, alas! he is all but alone. Mario, indeed, struggles to his feet, and, with tottering steps, follows his father, as do two others. Before they have advanced a yard, they are again hurled to earth by another volley of rocks, thrown with prodigious force, apparently from within the doorway of the hut.

Just as Andrea Vitelli, pale, bleeding, but undaunted, struggles to his feet for the second time, a loud shout is heard from his own men on the other side, and, turning his gaze that way, he sees that a general rush is made for the horses.

"Hold, cowards! would you fly?" he shouts, hoarse with rage, on seeing this movement, which he can only interpret in one way. But another and louder shout is borne on the breeze, and the conviction comes to him that it is not from his own men. Hastily turning his eyes in that direction, he sees, riding up the road at a quick trot, a large body of horsemen. Then it is that he awakes to the truth, and knows that he is attacked in the rear. It is not often that Andrea Vitelli has been seen to lead a retreat; but on this occasion it is so; for he is the first back across the bridge, and in the saddle, to lead his soldiers and confront this new foe. And now, as the horsemen approach, waving

their swords and shouting, he is able to distinguish the banner they bear.

" 'Tis the flag of the Marquis Campirelli," he says, turning to his son, who is now on horseback by his side. " A curse upon my leniency ! Only the other day I might have burned his palace about his ears, but spared it, thinking him a harmless, effeminate noble, and one who was not my enemy. What this means I know not. Let him look to himself !"

If there could have been any doubt about the intentions of this fresh body of horsemen, it was soon put to rest ; for, with cries of " A Campirelli ! Death to Vitelli, the bandit !" they charged full down on Andrea's weakened forces, and a desperate hand-to-hand contest commenced. At the first shock, the fresh men of the marquis bore their antagonists before them by sheer force of numbers ; but soon the hired soldiers of the plains began to feel the disadvantage they laboured under in contending with hardy, well-trained, and desperate men, such as composed the band of Vitelli. Though more numerous than the others, the stubborn valour of the bandits soon began to tell a tale. Again and again Andrea Vitelli drove spurs into his horse, and charged right into their line, dealing death on all he could reach with his long, heavy sword.

" A Campirelli ! Campirelli, to the rescue !" shouted the marquis, who had been unhorsed by a sweeping cut, the force of which his guard could

not withstand. And, indeed, there was good reason why the marquis should shout for aid ; for he found himself on foot, bleeding from a sword-cut on the head, and almost surrounded by the fierce soldiers of Vitelli.

“Take him alive, take him alive !” shouted the latter. “We will hang him on the ramparts at sunset.”

Campirelli heard the words, and, knowing the fate which awaited him if captured, endeavoured, although on foot, to fight his way through his enemies. For a moment his tall, handsome figure is seen, brandishing his sword, and fighting his way desperately on ; then a trooper charges him, and although the furious sword-cut he makes at him fails to take effect, Doria Campirelli is dashed to the earth, and trampled beneath the horses’ feet. Captain Colorado, seeing the fall of his chief, succeeds in rallying around him some score of brave men, and shouting “A Campirelli !” charges towards the place where the marquis was last seen. The rest of the troop follow more leisurely, for they had every reason to fear the desperate valour of Andrea’s mountainers.

These latter awaited their coming with the utmost composure ; and though but half their number, greeted their advance with taunts and derisive shouts. But just at this moment, when victory seemed certain, the voice of Bel Demonio is heard on the other side of the chasm.

"Fire!" And this is instantly succeeded by a volley, delivered with such deadly aim as to empty a score of saddles. Necessarily this must cause great confusion among the ranks of the bandits, attacked thus before and behind. And, at the very moment when the dead and wounded were dropping from the saddles, Campirelli's men, led by Captain Colorado, charged full on their confused array.

There were some desperate hand-to-hand fights; but, spite of all that the reckless valour of Andrea Vitelli could do, his men were forced back even to the very breastwork they had erected, and he himself was hard-pressed.

What made their position so desperate was, not the horsemen in front, but the deadly fire of the sharpshooters in their rear; and even Andrea Vitelli saw that there was a good chance of their being utterly destroyed.

In vain he again and again charged at the head of a chosen few, with the war-cry, "A Vitelli! a Vitelli!"

One, or perhaps two, of the enemy went down under his sword-strokes; but when he turned to look for those who should support him, he saw, to his rage and horror, that they were all unhorsed by the sabres of the Campirellis, or shot down by the more ruthless sharpshooters of Bel Demonio. Seeing his critical position, Andrea Vitelli turned his horse's head, and, glaring around like a wounded lion, cut his way by sheer hard fighting through

those of the Campirelli who were between him and his own men.

"Mario, Mario, where are you?" he shouted, breathless from the terrible exertion, when he regained his own troops. "Dismount half the men, place them behind the breastwork, and let them shoot some of these accursed Campirellis from their saddles. The horsemen will give them work enough, and prevent them charging up to you."

The chief's orders were quickly executed; and while he, with his mounted men, drew on one side, the rest, under the command of Mario, opened a galling fire on the ranks of the Campirelli, emptying several saddles at the first fire.

This caused the latter to give way, and was welcomed by a loud shout from the bandits, who now again began to pluck up heart, some even leaping over the breastwork, as if to follow up their success. But at this moment Bel Demonio's men again opened fire. Again, from behind every rock and bush on the mountain in the rear, puffs of smoke spurted out, and the bullets, plunging into the close array of those occupying the breastwork, soon drove them out in confusion.

Nor did the horsemen under the command of Andrea Vitelli escape. Many a gallant steed was seen dashing riderless away, and soon all was confusion and panic. Thus attacked in front and rear, Andrea Vitelli saw that the position was desperate, and scarce hoping for victory, resolved to die fight-

ing rather than yield. Campirelli's men were marshalling themselves in a double line, evidently for another charge; while the murderous fire of Bel Demonio's sharpshooters precluded all hope of steady junction among the force of Vitelli. Each moment men fell around him. Still the brave bandit undauntedly endeavoured to rally them to resist the onslaught of the Campirellis, who now numbered fully ten to one.

"Charge!" shouts the marquis, who, though bruised and bleeding, has regained his horse, and now leads the van. The hoofs of some seventy horses thunder over the hard ground, as they sweep down on the broken and disorganised few who still stand firm around their leader. By the side of the marquis rides a Negro, with a long white cloak floating on the wind. The doomed remnant, still holding their ground around Vitelli, recognise the grim livery of Bel Demonio's men, and their hearts sink within them.

On they come, like a mountain torrent, shouting, yelling, confident of victory.

Andrea knits his brow, and gnashes his teeth savagely.

"To be caught thus, like a rat in a trap!" he mutters. "By the thunder of Heaven! my sword shall drink some of their heart's blood ere I fall."

Suddenly, and when the Campirellis are within less than fifty paces, the fire from the rear ceases, and the shrill blast of a bugle is again heard. In-

stantly the blaek riding by the side of the marquis holds up his hand, and, reining in his horse, grasps the bridle of Campirelli.

“Halt!” shouts the latter ; and, in obedience to the order, the charging horsemen pull up within twenty yards of the foe.

“Andrea Vitelli, I would parley with you.”

It is the same clear, sweet voice which he has heard before, and turning, he sees Bel Demonio outside the hut, waving a white handkerchief on his sword as a token of truee. “A truee!” he continues ; “I will grant a truee. If you are content to return home, a free passage shall be granted you ; renew your attaek to-morrow, or when you will. For the present, if you choose to accept the terms, the word of Bel Demonio is pledged for your safety.”

There was a tinge of triumphant scorn, as Andrea thought, in the tone, but this was no time to resent it ; so, knowing that otherwise utter destruction awaited him and his men, he lowered his sword in token of submission, and said, though his heart burned with rage and mortification :

“I have no choies. I am outnumbered and surrounded. I accept the free passage you offer.”

Bel Demonio waved his hand, and immediately the Marquis Campirelli gave the word to his men, and, turning their horses’ heads, they rode slowly away, and in a few minutes were out of sight.

Then Andrea Vitelli, having collected his wounded

and dead, and placed them on litters and ambulances he had brought with him, followed their example, and slowly began to descend the road by which he had come. Totally unsuspecting of danger, he thought nothing of a shouting and trampling of hoofs he heard ahead. “These accursed Campirelli—celebrating their victory! Let them shout and yell. By the thunder of Heaven! I will let them feel my vengeance yet. And Bel Demonio, though I must e'en own he is an honourable enemy, he too must learn that Andrea Vitelli is not to be thus foiled.” Now the shouts grew louder, and a large body of horsemen are seen coming up the road at a gallop. At first Vitelli looked merely in wonder, then doubt; till at last, reeognising the flag borne in front, he shouted :

“Hercules Vitelli, my enemy, by the living God! Halt!—back, men!—form two deep, and at the word, ‘Charge!’ let us cut our way through them.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RESCUE.

IT was indeed so; and to their dismay, Andrea’s men, many of them wounded, all exhausted and dispirited, recognised the banner of Hercules Vitelli, Count of Spoleto, their most deadly and indefatigable enemy. The swarthy countenance of Andrea Vitelli turned livid with rage. “Treason! treason!” he

cried ; “ this cursed Bel Demonio has betrayed us !” Then, rallying round him the best and most trustworthy of his men, he prepared to do desperate battle, determined, if he could not save, at least to sell his life dearly. The situation did indeed seem desperate. In front, ranged in order of battle, was the murderous and well-appointed force of the prince, relying on their superior numbers, and confident of victory. These spread themselves out in a long line, so that, when the charge was delivered, they should completely overlap both flanks of the exhausted and dispirited band of Andrea. Nevertheless, these latter, though exhausted and wofully diminished in number, presented a bold front, prepared to resist the charge, and, if possible, to cut their way through the enemy.

And now, marshalled by the gallant Capitano, the prince’s men, with loud shouts, advanced at a trot ; but suddenly, when scarce one hundred yards separated them from the approaching forces, a bugleblast is heard in the rear, on the other side of the chasm. This is succeeded by a loud and fearful shout, or rather yell ; and, turning his head for a moment from the advancing foe, Andrea sees to his dismay Bel Demonio, at the head of some fifty black horsemen—their eyes glaring fiercely, their white cloaks blowing in the wind—advancing at a rapid pace towards the gulf. “ All is lost !” said Andrea Vitelli ; “ our only hope is to cut our way through them with the desperation of despair.” He gave the word, “ Charge !” and the next moment the forces of

Prince Hercules and the bandit met in the shock of battle.

So fierce was the onslaught of these desperate men, that the foe, though fresh and double in their numbers, were for a moment checked, and retreated a few yards in a disorganised mass. At this moment the clear ringing tones of the mysterious chief himself rose upon the air—"Bel Demonio ! Bel Demonio !" and then the mountains rang with the inarticulate yells of the Negroes ; the chasm was cleared at a bound ; and Bel Demonio's blacks rush madly on towards the mingled mass of Andrea's and the prince's men engaged in deadly combat. Suddenly, when within fifty yards, Bel Demonio swerves to the right, and, to the astonishment of both parties, gallops round the contending forces. For a moment or so, both suspend hostilities ; but Bel Demonio does not long leave his intentions in doubt. Again the clear shout, "Bel Demonio ! Bel Demonio !" rings out on the mountain air. Again the harsh yells of the blacks strike terror into all ; and then, with irresistible fury, the band of gigantic blacks dashes into the fight. Shouts of "Bel Demonio ! Bel Demonio !" "Spoleto !" "A Vitelli ! a Vitelli !" are mingled in wild confusion. At first Andrea cannot believe his own eyes ; but soon it is forced upon him beyond all doubt, that Bel Demonio's fury is not directed against his men, but against those of Hercules Vitelli.

The conflict was brief and bloody ; the prince's

forces were scattered like chaff before the wind, and, in less than five minutes, all were in full flight; the blacks pursuing, with fierce, inarticulate cries; their swords dripping, and their horses spattered with blood. But few of the panic-stricken men of the prince escaped; for the road was rough, in places almost impassable, while the pursuers were fierce and relentless, ever encouraged in their work of blood by the shrill voice of the slender, masked young man, crying always, "Bel Demonio! Bel Demonio! Death to Hercules Vitelli!"

For the distance of full half a mile the ground was strewed with dead and dying horses, and all the dripping scimitars of the black demons never ceased their bloody work till there were no more left to kill.

Then, by a loud blast, Bel Demonio recalled his men around him, and made his way back. As he passed Andrea Vitelli, who was also engaged collecting his men, he reared his sword aloft. "Andrea Vitelli," he said, "go in peace; you have naught to fear from Bel Demonio!"

The bandit-chief in reply took off his hat. "Bel Demonio," he said, "you are as gallant and true a friend as you are terrible a foe. You are worthy to share the dominion of the mountains with Andrea Vitelli. Henceforth we are friends; and, should either require it, let each come to the other's aid."

But Bel Demonio rode on in silence, as though he scorned friendship, yet feared not enmity.

Andrea Vitelli, collecting his dead and wounded, wended his way slowly down the defile; and soon, but for the stiffening corpses of the slain, there remained no sign of the conflict that had taken place.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RETURN OF REGINA.

It was in a very different manner, and with greatly altered feelings, that Andrea Vitelli led his band away from the scene of slaughter. For perhaps the first time in his life, the fierce bandit had been defeated and defeated in his own Abruzzi, and even owed the escape of himself and men from utter destruction to the magnanimity of his foe.

No wonder, then, that the chieftain's brow was dark as he rode slowly at the head of his men, his right arm in a sling, and his forehead bound up by a scarf; for in the desperate *mélée* he had been twice wounded. Mario, too, had been badly hurt; and, indeed, there were but few who had escaped without some wound to remind them of Bel Demonio.

Alma Vitelli had long been watching and waiting in an agony of suspense, when some wounded stragglers, who hastened in, arrived and informed her of the disaster her uncle had sustained. "Defeated! wounded!" she repeated the words to herself, scarcely able to realise the fact. "And

Mario—what of him ?” she asked eagerly ; “**is he** unhurt ?”

“ No, lady ; he too is wounded, as, indeed, are most of us. *Peste !* This Bel Demonio has a heart and hand of iron. When next our captain rides forth to attack him, may I not be of the company !”

Alma, pale and torn with anxiety for the safety of him she loved, hurried to prepare bandages and medicaments to be laid on with her fair hand. While thus employed, she heard the sound of some one on horseback riding rapidly in the courtyard, and before she could leave to see who it was, she met her cousin Regina on the threshold.

A cry of terror escaped the young girl. Regina was deadly pale, covered with dust, toil-worn, her face grimed with smoke and powder.

“ Holy saints, protect us, Regina !” she cried ; “ what has happened ? See, your toilet is grimed with dirt, your face with smoke. Ah, and there is blood, too, on your neck ! Dear cousin, you are not hurt, I trust !”

“ No, no,” replied Regina, speaking hastily, and in husky tones ; “ I had a fall from my horse, and got this scratch on my neck. Haste, Alma dear, and bind it up ; I wish to retire to rest before our uncle comes. I like not the thought of his seeing me thus.”

Alma’s delicate hands were soon deftly employed in tending the slight scratch, for it could scarcely be called more ; while her womanly curiosity found

vent in numerous questions. Regina could not, with any civility, refuse to answer ; but, nevertheless, she avoided the subject of her doings as much as possible, and her replies were curt and unsatisfactory.

“ Dearest Regina, where have you been ?”

“ Up in the mountains, to witness the fight between our men and Bel Demonio.”

“ Great heavens ! have you, then, been with our uncle and Mario all through the disastrous conflict ?”

“ No, Alma ; nevertheless, I witnessed all.”

“ Where, then, were you ?”

“ With Bel Demonio.”

A cry of dismay broke from Alma.

“ With Bel Demonio ! with our enemy !”

“ Who said so but yourself, Alma ? and, beside, if it was so, what then ? What harm has this Bel Demonio done to Andrea Vitelli, that he should thus ruthlessly attack him ? Ha, ha ! but Bel Demonio is not thus easily dealt with. He is no contemptible enemy, as even our uncle knows now.”

“ But, Regina, you know his fierce temper. This repulse will only increase his fury. He will renew the attack with a stronger force, nor rest till Bel Demonio is captured, and his band dispersed.”

“ Andrea Vitelli will never attack Bel Demonio again.”

Alma looked up in surprise at her cousin.

“ Regina, how know you this ?”

“ Alma, I tell you I witnessed some of the fight

and know all. Has not Bel Demonio himself told me ? Do I not know that but for his forbearance—say, his active aid—Andrea and his men would all have been slain ?”

Alma’s curiosity here got the better of her terrors, and she urged Regina to give her an account of all she had seen and heard ; she pressed her to be seated on a low stool, and then, while she bathed her face and neck, and arranged her disordered hair and dress, Regina told her as much as she chose of the attack and the repulse ; not all, however, for she kept back much : among other things, the fact that she (Regina) had procured for Bel Demonio the aid of the Marquis Campirelli, and had even herself conducted him to his presence. But she told Alma quite enough to excite unmitigated surprise, and even increased dread of this mysterious being.

While she was yet giving vent to her feelings in exclamations of astonishment, the tramping of feet and noise without told that Andrea had returned.

“ Say I am unwell, Alma, and have retired early to rest, if he makes inquiries for me.”

Then Regina hurried away to her own room, and was seen no more that night.

Andrea Vitelli did not fail at once to inquire for the girl ; and Alma, ever tender and complaisant, told him simply that she had gone to rest, without even letting him know that the wild girl had ever been away for any time.

Then came the task—half pleasing, half painful

—of tending the wounds of Mario, who, though suffering much pain, was not seriously hurt.

Surely it were almost a pleasure to be wounded, to be so softly and delicately tended by the fair hands of the gentle Alma.

At least, Mario thought so ; and we will, for the present, leave him in her care, her sweet voice, loving eyes, and pleasant smile robbing bodily pain of half its sting.

CHAPTER XV

BEL DEMONIO'S VENGEANCE.

THE Marquis Campirelli, as the reader will have remarked, implicitly followed the directions of Bel Demonio, trusting himself entirely to the guidance of the black who rode by his side.

At the sound of the bugle, accordingly, he called off his men, and leisurely made his way back down the defile. He had not gone far when they met the force of the Prince Hercules, pursuing the direction from which the former had come. It filled him with some amazement, as it appeared to do the black who rode with him. This led him to believe that the arrival of the fresh force was unexpected by even Bel Demonio himself.

Hercules Vitelli, who was present with his troop,—riding, however, well in the rear, with a chosen few around him,—seemed equally astonished, especially when he noticed the broken armour, and bloody and

dirt-stained appearance of the Campirellis, attesting that they had been in combat.

However, as Hercules Vitelli and Campirelli were not on the most friendly terms, they merely saluted, and each rode on.

We have already seen the reception the prince met, and will now follow the Marquis Campirelli for a space.

So soon as they arrived at the Devil's Horn, the black signified his intention of leaving, and produced a small note, which he handed to the young noble.

This was from Regina, and ran thus :

“ MY DEAR MARQUIS,—I will wait upon you at your palace on the day after to-morrow. Hitherto you have honourably fulfilled your word. I doubt not that Bel Demonio is well pleased with your valour. Do not fail to make the necessary arrangements about the villa I spoke to you of, and, in return, believe her part of the compact will be faithfully kept by yours ever,

REGINA.”

The marquis's eyes sparkled with joy, and his pale cheek—pale from the reaction after excitement and loss of blood—flushed as he read the flattering note.

“ My own, my sweet, my glorious Regina ! A twelvemonth, and I shall call you mine !”

Then he kissed the note, and placed it in his breast. As he did so, his hand touched the little tablets on which the black had written. This re-

called the circumstance which, in the subsequent tumult and confusion, he had forgotten, and, eagerly opening them, he proceeded to inspect the writing. To his great disappointment, he discovered that the writing was in a strange language. He was a better-read man than most of the age, and a closer scrutiny led him to believe that the characters were Arabic or Moorish.

"Doubtless the learned Doctor Garcia," he said to himself, "will be able to decipher the writing for me."

Then placing the tablets and notes in his breast, he rode on, and arrived safely at his own palace-gates.

He was too much fatigued, and his wound and several bruises too painful, for him to think of visiting the learned doctor in Spoleto that day ; but, having had his hurts cared for by the surgeon, he retired to rest, to dream by turns of the beautiful Regina and the dark mystery shrouding Bel Demonio.

The Marquis Campirelli took an early opportunity of visiting Doctor Garcia, to ask for an explanation of the strange characters on the tablets. The latter confirmed his first opinion, and pronounced the writing to be in a dialect of one of the nations of Northern Africa. Freely translated, it ran thus :

"Bel Demonio is a great chief; his power is irresistible, his vengeance terrible. He first obtained his power from our master, a great and learned sage from beyond the sea. The lady frequently visits

Bel Demonio. It is death to speak to or follow her. It is death to enter the private chambers of the hut unbidden. The commands of the lady are obeyed as implicitly as those of our master. We have never seen his face; he is always masked. The lady is—”

Here the writing came to an abrupt end, through the return of Bel Demonio.

“The lady is—what?” murmured the marquis. “What was he about to write, when the footstep of Bel Demonio caused him to desist? His love? his mistress?”

There was madness in the thought, and the marquis strode hastily away, torn by feelings of jealousy and distrust.

“Shall I never solve this mystery?” he thought. “Perhaps it were better to give up all thoughts of so doing, and accept the promised love of Regina blindly, and without questioning. We will see. Tomorrow she gladdens me with her bright presence.”

But Regina deigned a visit to the young nobleman before the promised time; for previous to the setting of the sun, as he strolled in the grounds, he heard with rapture the musical tones of her voice, inquiring for him.

The meeting on his part was tender, rapturous; but there was a *hauteur*, a reserve in her manner, which cut him to the soul.

“Regina,” he said anxiously, “you are not sad, —you are not displeased with me?”

Her dark eyes were fixed with a piercing glance on his face, as she replied :

“ Doria Campirelli, I thought you were a man of honour.”

A flush of anger came to his face.

“ And am I not?—who dares gainsay it?”

“ I have seen Bel Demonio to day,” she replied quizzically, still keeping her gaze fixed on him.

“ Well?”

“ Is it the act of an honourable man, Marquis Campirelli, to attempt to suborn another’s servants by means of a bribe? Bel Demonio bids me return these pieces of gold you gave to one of his men, and charges you not to repeat the act.”

Campirelli coloured up this time with shame, and attempted to stammer out some apology.

“ Do not attempt to excuse yourself, marquis. Know that no harm is done. The wealth of the Indies, given in bribes, cannot buy Bel Demonio’s secrets, for this reason—that he keeps them to himself.”

“ Pardon me, Regina,” he said imploringly; “ it was the very fervour of my love which caused me to transgress.”

Regina bent her graceful head haughtily, her lip curling slightly with scorn.

“ See to it, my lord marquis, lest you incur Bel Demonio’s vengeance and forfeit my favour.”

“ Bel Demonio’s vengeance has no terror for me, Regina; but your displeasure—ah, that is indeed a terrible threat! Come, the air is rather chill this

evening. Allow me to conduct you to the saloon, and offer you some refreshment."

He attempted to take her hand to lead her in ; but, with an imperious gesture, Regina motioned to him to precede her.

He bit his lip with vexation at her manifest coolness, but the fire of love burned yet fiercer in his breast, fanned, as it were, by the breeze of her displeasure.

It was plain that Regina knew well how to maintain her sway over his heart, for at that moment her power was more omnipotent than ever.

The marquis ordered refreshments, and while waiting for them, Regina rested herself on a couch, and commenced playing carelessly with the tassel of her riding-whip, not deigning her host a look, or seeming conscious of his presence.

"Really, Regina, you treat me very ill to-day," he said presently. "Surely you are not so cruel as to refuse me your forgiveness?"

"Really, marquis," she replied carelessly, "I do not think you deserve it. It was a dishonourable action on your part—an act which, doing you no good, lowered you in the estimation of Bel Demonio, and, let me add, of myself, and brought a terrible vengeance on the faithless servant who dared attempt —attempt, I say ; for he is too wise to give subordinates aught to reveal—to betray his master's confidence. Marquis, when you bribed that black man, you doomed him to death."

"To death, Regina!" cried Campirelli; "surely not so! Bel Demonio is too merciful, too chivalrous, to visit with death so slight an offence."

"Slight offence, you call it? Too brave, too chivalrous, you said! Allow me to assure you that I know Bel Demonio, and, furthermore, I know that the wretched black has long ere this paid the penalty of his life for his crime!"

"His life, Regina! Surely you must be jesting! How can you know this? I will not believe it."

"How know I this? I know it, because Bel Demonio said he should die, and Bel Demonio never fails in his word."

There was a terrible emphasis on those last words, which struck quite a chill to the soul of Campirelli, who was really a good-hearted fellow. He rose to his feet, and said eagerly:

"But, Regina, say that this terrible sentence is not yet carried into execution! There is yet time. I will myself intercede for the man; you, too, Regina. He will surely listen to you, and be merciful."

The marquis spoke with deep feeling, really dismayed to learn that through him the black should have incurred the terrible vengeance of his master.

"Too late, marquis, too late!" she replied, in tones musical, but cold and indifferent; "too late! Stay, a servant is waiting."

"A messenger from Bel Demonio, my lord, de-

sires an audience. He bears with him a casket which he will deliver to none but yourself."

"Introduce him," said the marquis, "at once."

During the interval which elapsed before the messenger was ushered in, Regina played carelessly with the tassel of her whip, shooting quick, flashing glances, however, from her dark eyes occasionally at Campirelli.

A tall, black man, attired in the well-known white cloak, and wearing the huge curved sabre of Bel Demonio's men, entered.

He bowed lowly, reverently to Regina, again to the marquis, and then placed a casket on the table.

"Stay," said the marquis, as the man turned to leave; "is that all? have you no message?"

The black touched his lips with his hand, shook his head, and the next instant vanished.

"What is the meaning of this, Regina? Bel Demonio is certainly most mysterious in his ways."

"How can I tell you the meaning of it, marquis?" she replied.

"I suppose I had better open the casket."

"I think probably that would be the best solution of the difficulty," she replied, with a smile.

The casket was heavily bound with iron, and opened with some difficulty. In order to effect this, Campirelli took it in both hands, and, turning it on one side, gave a somewhat violent pull to the lid. This instantly flew open, and there rolled out on the

floor a horrible object: *a black man's head!*—the hideous features rendered yet more hideous by the blood which besmeared them.

The marquis, with a cry of horror, let fall the casket on the table. Regina also screamed, and hid her face with her hands.

"What means this outrage—this insult?" gasped the marquis, when he had somewhat recovered from the shock. Then he espied on the ground a paper which had also fallen from the casket.

He picked it up, and read:

"THE VENGEANCE OF BEL DEMONIO ON A TRAITOR!"

CHAPTER XVI.

ALMA AND REGINA.

ALTHOUGH the queenlike Regina could, by her great beauty and numerous charms, make all bend before her sway, she was not herself exempt from the passions which sway alike rich and poor, handsome and ill-favoured.

Regina passionately loved her cousin Mario, and was at times furiously jealous of poor Alma, who, though so timid and retiring, yet, by an attraction unseen and mysterious, seemed to draw Mario to herself. But though the handsome Amazon sometimes felt the pangs of jealousy, she yet had little fear of not winning her cousin's love. Was she not

Regina, the mountain-queen? Had not all who had come within her influence bent beneath her yoke? Was not the rich, noble, and handsome Marquis Campirelli her most humble and obedient slave? And had not many a gallant who, by chance, had met her, also succumbed to those flashing eyes, the beauties of her person, and the fascinations of her manner?

Assuredly so; and consoled by the thought, and the evident power she exercised over Mario when she chose to exert it, she feared not the result.

For some time after the disastrous attack on the stronghold of Bel Demonio, all was quiet within the castle-walls of Andrea Vitelli. He himself brooded in sullen silence over the humiliating defeat; the more humiliating from the fact that, but for the enemy he had attacked in all the insolence of power, he would himself have been cut to pieces by the forces of his more deadly enemy, Prince Vitelli. But Andrea, though sullen, and chafing like a wounded lion, meditated no further attack on Bel Demonio.

Not that he feared him, even after the proofs he had had of his power. But Andrea Vitelli, in a moment of enthusiasm, mayhap, at the chivalrous manner in which his victorious foe came to his aid, had offered his friendship; and the word of Andrea Vitelli was sacred, for good or evil. Accordingly, while his wounded men were recovering, the chief kept within the castle, usually sitting the greater

part of the day in the large dining-saloon alone, in gloomy state. At these times, none but Regina and Alma dared disturb him ; even his son Mario not caring to intrude on his privacy.

Regina amused herself much as usual, making frequent excursions, and, indeed, going and coming as was her wont—as uncertain as the wind. Lately, though, she seldom was absent for long, and generally chose times when Mario also was leaving the castle, thus precluding long interviews between him and Alma. No one ever knew where she went, or what she did ; in fact, all there had long since given up even noticing her goings and comings. She was looked upon as a sort of uncertain nymph, whom none had a right to question ; and, indeed, right or no right, it would have fared ill with any who should have so far presumed, with the exception of Andrea Vitelli, who, through extreme fondness for the girls, allowed them full liberty to do as they pleased, unquestioned, uncontrolled as the mountain air.

As for poor Alma, though the yearnings of her loving heart always seemed to draw her towards Mario, she yet forced herself to control the feeling, persuaded that he had bestowed his heart on Regina. How could she, she asked, less beautiful, less talented, less charming in every way, hope to compete with her cousin, whose beauty, she modestly thought, in comparison with her poor share, was in brightness as that of the noon-day sun to the pale lustre of the crescent-moon ? Besides, her affectionate heart could

not bear the idea of rivalry with Regina, whom she always called sister, and loved as such.

And so poor Alma resigned her dream of love, and, though with many sighs and tears, tried to think of Mario as a brother, some day to call Regina wife. It was a hard task for the poor child, and her languid manner, pale cheek, and sad looks gave evidence of the fire which was consuming her. She avoided Mario as much as possible ; when he, piqued at her growing coldness, asked for an explanation, she could give him none, but, with a faint smile, turned the subject.

“Alma, my sweet pet, my mountain-lily, what ails you?” said Andrea one day, drawing her tenderly towards him. “You look wan and pale ; are you not well, darling?”

“Yes, uncle, quite well.”

“Don’t ‘quite well’ me : your looks belie your words. I do not think you get enough of our fresh mountain air. See Regina, who is always out, how healthy and beautiful she is ! Note the colour in her cheek, the fire in her eye. By the way, child, where is Regina ?”

“She has been out these three hours, on her horse. As to where she is, uncle—as well ask whither the wind goes.”

“True, child ; and that reminds me. Mario ! Mario !” he called.

When his son answered the summons, he continued :

"Our poor little Alma here is looking wan and ill. An hour's ride or so, down to the plain and back, will do her good. We must see if we cannot bring the roses back to her cheek. Get your horse, and escort her. Nay me no 'nays.' My will is law in the Abruzzi," he said, smiling.

And so Alma was forced to yield, and presently rode out of the castle, attended by Mario.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LOVERS SURPRISED.

REGINA, as Alma had said, had long since gone out. She rode swiftly down the plain on the road to Spoleto, nor drew rein till she arrived at the villa the Marquis Campirelli had promised for her especial use. Probably she was to meet him by appointment, for he was already standing at the gate when she pulled up. Assisting her to dismount, he called a servant to attend to the horse, and then gallantly taking her hand, led her into the garden surrounding the villa.

Every thing around was bright and charming, and bore an unmistakable air of refinement and luxury. Fountains sparkled and bubbled on all sides ; grottoes and ornamental seats abounded ; and all along the wall, dividing the grounds from the land without, were ornamental trees and shrubs, which served the double purpose of securing shade and

privaey. Regina inspected all with the utmost glee, and seemed in high spirits. The terrible episode of the black's head had long since been forgotten.

"Oh, marquis, this is eharming ! These flowers —I know not which I admire most, their bright colours or sweet perfumes. Come, let us be seated. I will tell you for what purpose I beg this favour of you. You know, marquis," she eontinued, "that hitherto I have seen nothing of the gay, bright world. It is true, I have oncee or twiee been to Spoleto ; but my visits have been hurried and uncertain, and I was in eontinual terror of being recognised : closed to me were the gaieties of the Carnival, the bright glories of the theatre and Operahouse, and all the grand *fêtes* formed by the rank, talent, and beauty of Italy. But now, dear marquis, with your aid, this shall be all ehanged." She laid her two delicate hands on his, and gazed lovingly in his face with those dark, lustrous eyes of hers. "I know, dear marquis, I can count on you ; you shall be the cavalier who shall escort and introduce me to those gay scenes for whielh my soul pines ; yours shall be the arm on which I lean in ball-room, *fête*, Opera, or Colonnade ; and indeed, dear Campirelli, I will endeavour to adorn and enhanee such poor charms as I possess, so as not to disgrace your choice."

She nestled yet closer to him, her warm breath fanning his cheek, her lips apart, showing her pearly

teeth, her dark eyes bent on his with an eager, anxious look.

The marquis was not one to resist the fascination of her manner, the rapture of her close proximity.

“But, Regina,” he said, playing, unchided, lovingly with her beautiful hair, “how is this possible? Command me to the utmost extent of my power. Still I cannot see how this can be done. The nobles and ladies of Italy are powerful and proud, and even such glorious beauty as yours would fail to overcome their prejudices.”

“I will tell you,” she cried, starting to her feet, tossing her head proudly, and arranging the folds of her dress. “I am but a poor mountain-girl, I know; still, I trust, there is naught plebeian or vulgar in my appearance.”

“Regina,” he said warmly, interrupting her, “your beauty, your grace, your various charms, might well grace an emperor’s throne!”

“Doria Campirelli,” she said, “you have known me as Regina Vitelli, have you not?”

“Assuredly,” he replied, in some surprise.

“Then I am no longer so,” she said. “When I visit this villa or yourself, I am to you and all the world the Countess Florian Valiero.”

“The Countess Florian Valiero!” said Campirelli, bewildered. “But that is the name of an old Sicilian family, now nearly, if not quite, extinct.”

“So much the better, dear marquis,” cried Regina gaily; “it was for that reason I chose the

name. My privacy in this villa you have kindly lent me will be complete ; none will know when I enter or when I leave. As I shall frequently visit here, it will be thought my abode. You shall introduce me to the nobles and ladies of Spoleto as the Countess Valiero. You can give out, if you please, that, having left the south, I have purchased this villa of you, intending to make it my residence ; none will doubt you, none will doubt me, dear Campirelli—the thing is done."

Then, pouring out a flagon of wine, she held it to him, saying, "Come, my lord, drink to the health of the Countess Florian Valiero !"

The marquis took it laughingly ; he said, "Regina—I beg pardon, Florian—Regina, you are inimitable. I love you the more for your audacity. A health to the beautiful Countess Florian Valiero !" Then he drained the flagon, set it down upon the table, and, before she was aware of it, caught her in his arms and passionately kissed her.

"Come, come!" she said, extricating herself ; "you are treating the countess in a very uncere-monious manner. No matter, I forgive you this once. Now adieu ; I will see you again to-morrow."

CHAPTER XVIII.

MARIO AND ALMA.

As Alma and Mario rode forth together, both felt somewhat embarrassed. Mario felt annoyed and offended at his fair cousin's studied coolness towards him—a coolness which, he thought, almost amounted to courtesy. So, for some time they rode on in silence, he looking straight ahead, she with her gentle eyes timidly bent on the ground. Occasionally she ventured a stolen glance at Mario, but the expression of his face was so far from pleasant, that she quickly dropped her gaze again.

Presently they came to where the road branched off in two directions, and it was necessary, of course, to make a selection : one led along the mountain-side, the other down to the *Campagna*.

“ Which road shall we take, Alma ?” he asked.

“ Whichever you please, Mario ; I care not,” she replied, looking up for an instant to his face. Their eyes met, and Mario’s heart melted under the soft beam of her deep-blue eyes.

“ Let us descend, then. We have enough of the mountain-air at home. Perhaps the softer breeze of the plain may bring back the colour to your cheeks, cousin mine.”

She replied not, but merely smiled faintly.

“ Alma,” he continued, after a pause, “ what ails

you, that you thus seem to pine away? At one time no eye so bright, no laugh so gay, as those of my fair cousin. Are you ill, or are you in love?"

There was no need now to complain of want of colour, for she flushed crimson from cheek to brow.

"I am not ill, cousin," she murmured faintly.

"Then you must be in love. You have the symptoms, exactly: melancholy, love of solitude, paleness, usually varied by sudden flushings, as just now. Ah! there is no doubt of it; assuredly you are in love. Who is the favoured one, Alma? What, you will not answer? See I do not wring it from you by and by!"

He spoke in a tone of light banter, but beneath there lay a soreness and feeling of irritation.

Alma whipped up her horse, and rode on ahead, as though to avoid further questioning. But Mario noticed, as he spurred on behind, that her neck was crimson to the roots of her hair.

He soon caught her up, and, riding by her side, looked in her face, thinking, perhaps, she was offended or angry. But though she resolutely kept her gaze on the ground, the expression of her face was that of confusion—embarrassment, not anger.

Presently, as they descended the tortuous mountain-road, and neared the fertile plain, the rugged rocks on either side began to give place to trees, shrubs, and bush; and ere long, coming to a grove of fig and orange trees, Mario proposed that they should turn on one side awhile.

"For," he said, "I know a spring a few hundred yards to the right, where we can both rest ourselves, and also water our horses; for the day is hot; we have been riding fast, and the poor brutes are thirsty."

"As you please, cousin," said Alma.

They turned from the road, and, Mario leading, made their way through the trees, and halted at the foot of a little ridge, from whose side issued a spring of clear water.

This ridge or spur of hill was thickly covered by brushwood, while at the bottom and around the spring the ground was formed of clean white sand. At the top of the ridge, distant nearly a quarter of a mile, ran a mountain bridle-path, which was the shortest road from Spoleto to the fastness of Andrea Vitelli. This road, however, was rugged, and in places so steep as to be barely accessible. For this reason the bridle-path was rarely, if ever, used. Mario dismounted, and, having assisted Alma to do likewise, let the horses drink at the spring and browse on the herbage around at freedom, for they were too well trained to stray away.

"Come, Alma, sit and rest yourself awhile; I will go and gather some oranges for you; the sand is clean, and it is better to stay in the cool shade of the brushwood until the heat of the day is past. I will go and gather you some oranges."

Alma watched his retreating figure with mingled feelings of timidity, pleasure, and embarrassment. It

was long since she had been alone in her cousin's company for any length of time ; for, as we have said, distrusting her own heart, she had persistently avoided him.

He was not long absent, and returning with an armful of the ripe, fragrant fruit, seated himself at her feet, and began to peel one for her. After she had partaken of some, Mario, looking up in her face, said :

" And now, Alma, satisfy my curiosity. I told you before, you were in love ; nay, 'tis useless to deny it. Who is the man so blessed ? "

Again the tell-tale colour rushed to her cheek.

" It is not so, Mario. How can you be so foolish, so unkind ? For what do you take me ? "

" For a charming angel as you are, Alma," he replied, bending his ardent gaze in her face. His words but increased her confusion, and Mario, seeing in her blushing face no displeasure, felt emboldened.

" Well, Alma, since you will not answer me one question, I will put to you another. Will you reply truly and honestly ? "

" If I can, Mario."

" If you can ! Of course you can, if you so choose. Will you promise me ? "

" Yes," she replied, her eyes steadfastly bent on the ground.

" Why, then, have you lately behaved so coldly, so cruelly to me ? Why have you treated me with

such marked reserve? Why have you avoided me constantly? Have I offended you?"

No answer.

"It is true, Alma, that after the disastrous affair of the other day, you were kind enough to bind up the few slight scratches I received, and which you were pleased to call wounds."

"And they were wounds, Mario, and might have proved serious. That cut on your shoulder will be weeks before healing, I am sure."

"If you had not so kindly and skilfully tended them for me, you should say, Alma, they might have proved far worse. I give you all thanks, my kind, good cousin, for what you have done for me; but why, I ask, both before then and after, so persistently treat me in the manner you did?"

Alma was now fairly driven up into a corner, and forced to turn to bay.

"Ask Regina," she replied in sharper tones than her gentle voice was wont to sound. "Why should I divide your time, your thoughts, with her?"

"What has poor Regina done? Has she, too, offended you? Do you not wish me to be on good terms with her?"

"You will not understand me, Mario. It is for her sake I speak. I love Regina, and would not do aught to hurt her for worlds."

"What is it you would say, Alma? Is it, then, Regina who has instructed you thus to behave? By

Heaven ! if it is so, I will soon bring her Amazon ladyship to her senses."

He spoke quite angrily.

" No, no ; it is not that ; you know better. My own sense tells me I am right. I can see. I know that Regina is annoyed if you pay me any attention. Regina loves you, Mario, and you love her. Surely that is sufficient !"

" By Heaven ! 'tis false, Alma ! Who told you this ? I love Regina as a cousin or sister, no more ; and as for her caring for me, I believe she is enamoured of Bel Demonio ; for she is continually praising his elegant form and manners. Ha ! Yonder is some one watching us—a woman, too ! I will see what she may want."

" No, no, Mario ! Stay ; it is the poor creature they call 'the dark woman.' Ah ! how unhappy she looks ! She is continually hovering about. Regina and I scarce ever go out without seeing her."

" What ! the witch of the mountain, who always appears before and after a disaster to the Vitelli ? I would I had my carbine here—I would end her noxious spells."

" No, no, Mario ; do not talk so. The poor woman is quite harmless. I cannot think why people should say these wicked things of her. Regina, too, is terribly alarmed at her ; she who is so brave and daring, and fears not Bel Demonio. She has gone now, Mario. Perchance she heard our cruel words, poor woman !'

"What did she, then, spying on us? If I catch her within half a mile of the castle practising her vile spells, I will send her in to the chief. He will make short work of her."

"Peace, Mario! How fierce and cruel you are! The woman has not injured you; then wherefore are you angry?"

"It is you who have made me angry, Alma. Your words yet rankle in my heart. I had hoped other things, and you bid me go to Regina."

"Does not your own heart bid you, Mario?" said Alma in trembling tones, for a small flame of hope was arising in her bosom.

"I told you before, Alma, I love Regina as a sister. You I love with my whole heart and soul. Since, however, you bid me go to Regina, I will trouble you no more."

A wild thrill of joy shot through the young girl's frame as she heard those words, which were spoken impetuously, and with every evidence of truth.

"Could it be possible that Mario loved her really?" Her heart beat wildly at the thought, and, trembling with excitement, she turned away her head to avoid his eager gaze.

"Alma, is that your answer?" he asked.

But no answer came, while the heaving of her bosom told of her deep emotion.

"Speak, Alma," he said, and seized her hand, which lay languidly by her side.

But Alma spoke not, neither did she withdraw the hand he held.

Then, reading the truth in her silence, her confusion, her blushes, and the tears which now freely flowed, he caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and passionately kissed her lips again and again. Alma had neither the will nor the power to resist, and suffered him to lay her head on his shoulder, nor sought to withdraw from his embrace.

“Alma, dear Alma, say you love me!”

She opened her eyes, those soft, melting eyes, and, gazing in his, replied faintly :

“O Mario! you know not, I scarce know myself, how much I love you.”

“My own, my only love; to you I swear to be true and loyal; you only of all the women in the world will I ever call wife.”

They remained thus for a few moments, Mario breathing soft words of love in her ear, which she replied to only by smiles of happiness.

Could they have seen the gleaming eyes fixed on them from above; could they have seen the face, white with passion, within a dozen yards of them, their day-dream had been rudely interrupted. But it was not so, and they knew not that Regina Vitelli was in the brushwood, and had heard and seen all.

CHAPTER XIX.

▲ WOUNDED TIGRESS.

WHEN Regina Vitelli left the villa so generously lent to her by the Marquis Campirelli, she at once shaped her course back to the castle. She knew Mario was at home, and, as we have before had occasion to remark, she never, if possible, left for any length of time when he and Alma were both at home.

She rode fast, and wishing to arrive as soon as possible, took the mountain bridle-paths, which none knew better than herself, notwithstanding their steep and rugged nature.

It was while pursuing her way along a path more than usually unsafe and rough, that, being compelled to dismount and walk by the side of her horse, she suddenly espied two figures seated at the foot of a tree, and almost beneath her.

A slight exclamation of surprise and anger escaped her, for she at once recognised Alma and Mario.

Hastily fastening her horse to a trec-stump, she gathered her habit about her, and, despite the steep descent, and the brushwood filled with thorns and brambles, she made her way down slowly and noiselessly, till she could both see and hear all that passed.

At the first words she heard, the colour rushed to

her face, and then, as the conversation went on, back to her heart. She heard all : heard Mario say he loved her not ; heard him avow his love for Alma ; heard her confess hers for him. Then, with gleaming eyes and face of deadly pallor, she made her way back to her horse, mounted, and rode furiously off.

She arrived at the castle, looking the picture of an offended fury. Her horse was all covered with flecks of foam, as was her own dress, besides being torn in several places. The sentinel on the drawbridge shrank back, scared at her terrible look, and all in the courtyard drew on one side in wondering silence at her strange appearance.

She sprang from the saddle, threw the reins over the horse's neck, and then, without a word, passed in.

All thought that something terrible had occurred, for none had ever seen Regina in such a mood before.

Without pausing or turning to the right or left, she made her way to her own chamber, and locked herself in. There she threw herself on the couch, hid her face in her hands, and, bursting into a flood of tears, gave way to a storm of passion.

“ O Mario, Mario ! how I have loved you !”

That was the wailing cry that issued from her parched lips.

Presently the violence of her passion passed away. She arose, arranged her hair, and carefully dressed herself.

"Now love is dead within me!" she murmured ; "to the winds with all mercy, Mario ; you shall feel the vengeance of Regina slighted."

Then the threatening tones in which she said this changed to a wail of anguish.

"No, Mario, no," she cried, again burying her face in her hands, "I cannot kill you ; I cannot arm you ; for I have loved you. But Alma, Alma ! ah !"—and she absolutely hissed through her teeth in her fury.

What a beautiful tigress it was ! The white, glistening teeth, the gleaming eyes, the fingers extended as though about to tear her enemy to pieces. Desperately cruel she looked, but withal very beautiful.

She paced up and down her chamber, and in a short time, calling all her pride and fortitude to her aid, had, to all outward seeming at least, conquered her emotion.

"Now I am calm, quite calm ; love is dead within me. Nevertheless, I will not succumb ; I will live for vengeance. I will live to be a hater of my kind ; even more ruthless than I am at present. I will live to be courted and admired, but to mock and beguile. I will live to court love and friendship, but to spurn and crush the one, and betray the other. Ha ! ha ! I am young and beautiful. The world is wide and pleasant, and I have yet a long youth of beauty and triumph before me." Then she looked in the mirror, arranged her hair, and descended.

Those who had seen her enter a short time previously, her eyes gleaming like live coals, her face livid with passion, looking a perfect fiend, gazed in utter astonishment. Could this bright, smiling beauty be indeed the same ?

CHAPTER XX.

ALMA IS CONDEMNED TO BANISHMENT FROM HER HOME.

REGINA entered the great hall, where Andrea Vitelli sat, as was his wont lately, alone.

“ Uncle,” she said, seating herself by his side, “ where are Alma and Mario ? I can find neither of them.”

“ What say you, my child ? ” said the chief, the frown vanishing from his gloomy brow, and a smile succeeding, as was always the case in presence of either of the girls.

“ I asked for Alma and Mario,” she said pettishly. “ I can find neither of them.”

“ Alma and Mario ? Ah, now I bethink me, they have gone out together for a ride.”

“ Ah, ah ! ” she said, frowning ; “ Alma and Mario are always together now, uncle. I think Mario must be enamoured of her, and he professes to love me. But I will kill him, if he is false ! ”

Then she suddenly burst into tears, and threw herself on his shoulder.

"What means this grief, Regina? What mean your words? Alma and Mario!—surely my son thinks not of her?"

"Alas, I fear so! He is tired of me."

"And he professed to love you, Regina, and now dares to cast his eye on Alma? Perish the thought, ere such a thing shall be! I will kill him with my own hand, ere I will suffer son of mine to wed with Alma! Know you who she is, Regina?" asked the chief, halting suddenly; for in his anger he had started to his feet, and was pacing up and down the hall.

"She is my cousin, is she not, uncle?"

"She is the daughter of my deadly enemy, Hercules Vitelli! Years ago, in revenge for the murder of my father and the other deadly wrongs he did me, I stole away his child, the heiress of his name and estates. That child is Alma; and if Mario dares cast eye on her, he shall surely die, though I brain him with my own hand. By the thunder of Heaven! it shall not be! My son shall never wed with his daughter!"

Then the fierce bandit strode up and down the hall in silence.

Presently he stopped opposite Regina.

"And so, Regina, you love this son of mine?"

"I did, uncle," she replied, casting down her eyes; "but now I know not."

"Since he has played you falsely, you would say you are angry; 'tis but natural. No matter, I will

bring him to reason. Since you love him, Regina, he shall wed you. And as for Alma, she shall go back to her father. The sly jade! And yet I cannot find it in my heart to speak ill of her. Poor child! so loving, so gentle; my heart yearns towards her. Nevertheless, she must go. Regina, you have said enough to prove to me that the castle of Andrea Vitelli cannot hold Mario and her. Poor child! my gentle Alma! I shall miss her sadly."

Then the rough soldier brushed away a tear; probably the first that had dimmed his eye for many a long year.

"Leave me, Regina; I would be alone. I would lose my right hand rather than part with Alma; but there is no help for it. Mario is mad! I see it now; the girl's pale, unhappy look: all is plain."

When Mario and Alma returned, they were informed that the chief desired to see them instantly.

Wondering much at this sudden summons, they promptly obeyed, and stood before him awaiting his pleasure.

"Mario Vitelli, do you love yon girl by your side?"

"As my life," was the unhesitating reply.

"Ha! and you, Alma?"

But the young girl only held down her head, and blushed.

"Speak, Alma dear," said Mario.

"Silence, sir!" thundered his father.

Mario started in astonishment, and Alma gave

vent to a cry of terror. Neither knew that they had done wrong, and were at a loss to account for Andrea's stern manner.

Alma began to weep; and seeing this, the chief's heart softened.

"Uncle, have I offended you?" she murmured.

"No, child, no," he said in more gentle tones; "you are ever kind and loving. It is fate which is against you. I love you, Alma—child of my enemy; I love you as a father. But you must leave me, Alma. You and Mario must part for ever."

"O uncle, mercy!" the poor girl cried.

"But, father, I love my cousin."

"Silence!" shouted Andrea.

"I will not be silent."

Andrea snatched down a carbine from the wall and cocked it.

"Silence, Mario Vitelli!" he said; "or, though you be my son, you die."

He pointed the carbine at Mario's breast.

"Fire!" shouted the latter, folding his arms; "I defy you!"

"Leave this instant!" said Andrea, hoarse with emotion.

"Yes, yes, dear Mario, come, do come away!" and Alma, clinging to him, succeeded in dragging him off, muttering to himself, sullen and moody.

"Alma, come back! I would speak with you," said Andrea.

The gentle girl came when bidden, and humbly

knelt before him. Her light, fair hair fell over her shoulders ; her hands were clasped appealingly, her head cast down ; while tears fell plentifully.

Andrea could not withstand her silent, submissive grief. He raised her, folded her in his arms, and kissed her forehead.

" My poor child, it tears my heart to part with you."

" O dear uncle, do not send me away. I have been so happy here."

" Will you be a good girl ? Will you promise to do as I wish ?"

" Yes ; oh, yes ; only do not send me away from our home."

" Will you promise to give up all thoughts of my son Mario ? Will you promise never to speak to him alone ?"

She freed herself instantly from his embrace.

" No, I will not promise, uncle. I cannot promise—no—no, never ; so help me, Heaven !"

Her pale cheek flushed for a moment, and her eye lit up. She again fell on her knees, as a culprit about to receive sentence.

Regina, who had entered unheard, stood behind her, and regarded the scene with a singular smile.

Andrea Vitelli dashed his hand violently on the table.

" Then, by the thunder of Heaven ! you shall go back to Hercules Vitelli."

The poor girl bowed her head submissively, but spoke no word.

Andrea Vitelli stood gazing at her kneeling figure. Regina also stood gazing on her ; but on the face of the man there crept an expression of pity and sorrow, while on the beautiful face of Regina might have been read triumphant joy.

“Alma,” said Andrea in gentle tones, “go to your chamber, and remain there till I give you leave to quit it. Hercules Vitelli usually sends offering ransom twice or thrice a year. When next his messenger arrives, you will leave. Meanwhile, if you communicate with Mario, or allow him to communicate with you, he dies, and you sign his death-warrant !”

The poor girl rose from her knees, bowed submissively, and then, sobbing as though her heart would break, stole away.

Andrea Vitelli seated himself at the table, and buried his face in his hands.

Regina, who, unknown to him, stood calmly looking on, saw tears force their way through his fingers. His breast heaved convulsively. The bandit wept tears of bitter sorrow ; for, though he scarce avowed it to himself, he loved the gentle Alma as the apple of his eye.

CHAPTER XXI.

ALONE !

WHILE this stormy and painful scene was enacting at the castle of the bandit-chief, another, the reverse of the picture, was in progress at the palace of Hercules Vitelli, Prince of Monte Leone.

The childless, wretched old man is sitting, as is Andrea Vitelli, alone. But no soft, silvery voice of niece or daughter falls on his ear to dispel the cloud on *his* brow.

“Alone, alone ! surrounded but by hirelings in my old age. The curse of blood is upon me. No wife, no child, no friend ; ‘tis terrible thus to go down to the grave, to oblivion, or, perchance, obloquy.”

This was the purport of the old man’s mutterings, as he sat wretched in splendid solitude. Presently he touched a hand-bell, and an old woman replied to the summons. Few would have recognised in the haggard, wretched being, Mercedes, the duenna. It was not the weight of years which bowed her form, and drew the deep lines on her face, for she was not more than forty-five, but the weight of guilt—the consciousness of crime—and, above all, the knowledge that the dreaded bandit, Andrea Vitelli, had sworn to render life a burden to herself and her master, and, when its sand had all but run out, to put them to a terrible death.

The murderer's doom hung over their heads. A dozen times Andrea Vitelli could have slain them ; but he spared them for a life of misery, of terror, sure that the vengeance of blood was his whenever he chose to take it.

"Mercedes," said the prince, "the father of Andrea Vitelli is avenged. I am a wretched, childless old man, without kith or kin or friend, and hold my very life but by sufferance of this accursed bandit. May he be accursed, and may you be accursed, hag!"

"Curse me not, Hercules Vitelli, but rather curse your own avarice and ambition. Was it not you who forced me to do what I did ? On you, then, be the curse!"

"Peace !" said the prince ; "let us not wrangle one with the other. Once again I will offer terms to Andrea. Take him this message from me, that if he will give up my daughter, my heiress, and leave me in peace, I will assign him half my possessions."

"And he will reply—"

"What?"

"That all your possessions are by right his ; that your life is in his hands ; and that he will not give up your daughter."

"No matter ; go ask. Take with you Capitano and two men only. A larger escort would only anger him. Take with you a mule laden with silver ducats, and tell him this is but the first instalment of the vast sum which shall be his if he consents."

"And think you that he will yield, after refusing

so many years—now, when he yet chafes by reason of your attack on him the other day, an attack which he has none the more forgiven because unsuccessful and disastrous to you?"

"No matter, I will make the essay. Life thus childless and alone is unbearable. I have an inward feeling—a presentiment—sent from I know not where—"

"Not from heaven, certainly," muttered Mercedes.

"That Andrea will yet send back my child."

CHAPTER XXII.

A REQUEST.

"You are determined, then, again to send?" said Mercedes.

"Yes, yes."

"At least wait a few days, till his anger has time to cool."

"I will wait for one week only, no longer. Then if he again refuses, I will exhaust my treasury in hiring and equipping troops, and with five thousand men, if necessary, will attack and storm his castle."

"The Marquis Campirelli, my lord, would speak with you."

"Ha! what wants Campirelli with me?" he said to Mercedes. "However, I will see him. He is too wealthy and powerful to be offended. Tell the

marquis I will do myself the honour to wait on him shortly," said the prince to the lackey who brought the message.

The marquis was introduced to the presence of Hercules Vitelli.

"How fares it with the Marquis Campirelli?" said the prince, with studied politeness; for, although not on the most cordial terms, the semblance of cordiality was kept up. Besides, the prince could not afford to quarrel openly with the powerful nobles, of whom Campirelli was not the least: for many rumours were afloat concerning him, and his name was in too ill repute for him to risk offence against men who would, on occasion, unscrupulously band together and effect his ruin.

"Well, I thank you, prince; I trust I find you the same. My immediate errand to you is this: I have a favour to ask."

"It is granted, marquis, before you ask it," replied Hercules, bowing, but wondering at the same time what possible favour the rich and powerful Campirelli could have to ask from him. True, he was also wealthy, and owned great estates; but the bitter feud waged against him by Andrea Vitelli was well known, as was the fact that the weak, bad prince was in mortal terror of his fiery relative, and, indeed, almost held his own by sufferance.

"Thanks, prince. I know your generosity and complaisance. The favour I ask is simply this. A distant connection of mine has purchased one of my

villas, and intends to take up her residence near Spoleto. She is wealthy and noble, and her name is the Countess Florian Valiero."

"Ah! I have heard the name. A Sicilian family, I believe."

"Quite right, prince. This lady is a complete stranger to all the nobility of this part of Italy. She wishes for introductions and an entry into that society to which her rank entitles her. I hear that a grand *fête* is to take place at your palace before long, at which all the rank, beauty, and wealth of Spoleto will be present. I would humbly beg that my kinswoman, the Countess Valiero, might number one of the company."

"My dear lord," said the prince with emphasis, "your asking was superfluous. The Palace Vitelli is ever open to the Marquis Doria Campirelli and his friends. A special invitation shall be at once forwarded to the countess. Rooms shall be prepared for her, and every possible consideration shown to one whose own rank, backed by your introduction, must always command respect and honour."

"Prince, I am deeply your debtor," said Campirelli, bowing.

"On the contrary, marquis, it is I who am yours."

The marquis then bade the prince adieu, leaving the latter in some wonderment as to the reasons which prompted a request thus urgently and personally presented.

"No matter," thought the prince; "it falls in with my views exactly. I cannot afford to lose the favour of these proud nobles. Their hostility, coupled with my many other troubles, would be fatal. So, Marquis Campirelli, your Sicilian countess shall receive every attention. Doubtless, some love-affair."

CHAPTER XXIII.

ALMA IS BANISHED FROM HER HOME.

THE prince had said he would wait a week before again sending Mercedes to offer an enormous ransom for his daughter and heiress to Andrea Vitelli. At the expiration of that week Mercedes set out for the castle of the bandit-chief, riding on a mule, with another, on which the prince hoped his daughter would return, and a guard, consisting of Capitano and only four men. There were also two other mules, loaded with gold and valuables, with which Hercules Vitelli hoped to buy his daughter's freedom. He had no misgiving that Andrea would retain the treasure without yielding the girl, for this was not the bandit's wont.

He had before sent back large sums of money, with the message, that when he wanted it he would come and take it.

Mercedes, accompanied by her escort, safely accomplished the mountain-journey to the bandit's

fastness, and was immediately shown into the presence of Andrea himself.

He regarded her sternly for a moment, and then asked, in threatening tones :

“ Well, woman, what want you with me ?”

Mercedes paled to the very lips at the harsh voice of the bandit, and she could not for a time find words. She raised her eyes to the face of Andrea Vitelli, and was astonished to see the little change which nearly twenty years had made in him. He appeared still supple and vigorous as a young man, and, but for a few silver hairs in his dark locks, might have been taken for one.

“ Come, woman, speak ! I am master here.”

“ I know it,” replied Mercedes humbly.

“ This is the third time you have dared to beard me in my mountain-home.”

“ True, my lord ; but it is not my will,” she said, trembling ; “ my master the prince compels me.”

“ Prince !” shouted Andrea, starting to his feet ; “ dare to call the murderous usurper ‘ prince ’ again in my presence, and I will hang you from the battlements !”

Mercedes fell on her knees.

“ I am sent here by Hercules Vitelli,” she faltered.

“ Go on.”

“ He is old, feeble, and wretched. He can scarcely bear the weight of his misfortunes. He begs mercy of you, my lord Andrea. His wife is dead—dead from grief and fear ; his daughter torn

away. Think of him, and be merciful, as you hope for mercy—a poor, friendless old man, tottering into the grave."

"His wife is dead," said Andrea gloomily; "and so is Lucrecia Mammona. My father, too, is dead—murdered by him and you!"

"Mercy, mercy!" cried Mercedes, clasping her hands.

"Speak!—what do you want?" was the stern answer.

"My master has lost every thing at your hauds, even his courage. He cannot contend with one so terrible. He knows that you wield a power beyond the power of men. He knows that neither iron gates nor stone walls can protect him from you. Has he not seen you—your phantom, mute and threatening—standing with naked sword by his bedside?"

"And yet I will not kill him. The hour of vengeance has not yet struck."

"My master implores mercy," continued Mercedes. "Have you not done enough? You have burned his castles, ravaged his possessions, till even he cannot call the grass which grows in his palace courtyard his own. His very vassals insult and mock him, while they fear you. Deserted by friends, despised by enemies—is not all this enough to satisfy your vengeance, O Andrea Vitelli?"

"It is not enough," said Andrea coldly. "Speak! what is it you want?"

"O my lord! my lord! I will tell you; and, as

you hope for mercy, grant this request. It is the last hope of the old man : give him back his daughter."

"His daughter!" murmured Andrea, as if buried in thought.

The duenna thought he was about to refuse, and continued: "He has sent two mules laden with treasure for ransom."

Andrea drew up his stalwart form, and frowning darkly, shook his head, saying :

"Let his treasure perish with him! When I want it, I will come and take it."

"Alas!" cried Mercedes; "am I, then, to return again with a refusal? Mercy, O Andrea Vitelli!"

"Silence!" interrupted the bandit. Then, after pausing for some time, as if in deep thought, these words broke on the astonished ears of the woman: "I consent to give him back his daughter. You will take him back his daughter," confinued Andrea; "but you will tell him from me that all is not over yet between us; my vengeance will never cease but with his death." Then Andrea arose, and, calling an attendant, ordered him to send Alma to him.

The young girl entered slowly and sadly, and stood before her uncle. The chief's heart sank within him. He knew not till that moment, when he was about to lose her, how much he loved the gentle girl.

"My child," said Andrea slowly and sorrowfully, "you are about to quit us for ever, to go to your father, who has sent for you."

Alma burst into tears.

"Oh, do not send me away! Let me remain; let me be your handmaiden, your slave; but do not banish me from my home!"

The chief was deeply affected, but said nothing.

All this time Mercedes was attentively regarding Alma.

"It is not she," she muttered to herself; "this is not the child of the prince's wife, but of Lucrecia Mammona."

She dared not tell Andrea so, for she had long since lied to him, and said that Regina was the daughter of his sister; Alma, of the prince and his wife. And yet she shrank from the thought of taking to Hercules Vitelli the child of Lucrecia Mammona in place of his own.

"My lord," she murmured, summoning up courage, "are you sure that this is the daughter of Hercules Vitelli and his lady?"

"It was yourself who told me so," he said, fixing his cold, piercing glance on her face.

She had told him the lie many years ago, and now it bore its fruit. She dared say no more, for fear of the vengeance of Andrea. It only remained for her to make the best of it, and take back Alma, since she could not Regina.

Poor Alma stood with pale face, tearful eyes, and clasped hands, hoping that he would rescind the sentence which doomed her to banishment from all she loved

"My child," said the chief presently, "you are about to leave us. It must be. You have heard, before now, that you are the daughter of Hercules Vitelli, my enemy?"

"I have heard so, but hoped it was not true. Oh, do not send me away! I want no father but you."

"It is true, my poor child—too true. I feel for you the love of a father for his daughter, but have no right to keep you from your real father when he demands you."

"You have refused to give me up for sixteen years," she replied tearfully; "why, then, do you banish me now, now that I have learned to love you, and *Regina*, and *Mario*?"

"It must be so, my poor *Alma*! I must, though I love you. You must go back to your father. There is no escape. I, *Audrea Vitelli*, have said it."

Alma knew it was hopeless to appeal against his decision.

"Must I go now?" she asked mournfully.

"This woman is waiting to conduct you to your father."

"At least let me bid adieu to my sister *Regina* and *Mario*."

Audrea at once sent for *Regina*, but she was not to be found. She was not in the castle. *Mario*, too, had gone on an expedition which would keep him till late.

"Alas, alas!" murmured the poor girl; "every misfortune seems to come on me at once."

Andrea, impatient to shorten the painful scene, called one of his attendants.

"Conduct the lady Alma and this woman as far as the plains; then leave them, and return. My child, my dear Alma, my daughter, adieu!" said the bandit.

He opened his arms, received her in a close embrace, and held her so for a moment. The tears of the strong man fell on the soft tresses of Alma; he kissed her fair brow, and then, releasing her, strode hastily away.

In a few minutes Alma, weeping and sorrowful, was on her way to the palace of Hercules Vitelli, having left her mountain-home for ever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ALMA IS CONDUCTED TO THE CASTLE OF HERCULES VITELLI.

AT a distance of about a mile from Spoleto, there stood a castle, surrounded by a deep and wide moat, and adapted in every way for strength. This strong place was almost the only one left to Hercules Vitelli. Its walls were massive, and supposed to be impregnable.

It was in this fortress that Hercules Vitelli passed most of his time. Here, with a numerous body of armed men, he felt safe; which was not the case

even in his own palace of Spoleto. It was here that the miserable prince, weary of life, worn out by constant terrors and alarms, driven from all his lands by his remorseless enemy—in danger even in Spoleto, in his own palace—sought a refuge, and felt in a measure secure.

It was a dreary life, that in the Château Garcia : none were found there but soldiers and servants. The court of the prince had long since left him ; the only others who still followed the wretched fortunes of Hercules Vitelli were our old friends Capitano, Fanferluzzi, and Contarini. Capitano was still the gallant commander of the prince's men. Fanferluzzi and Contarini were still the same accommodating courtiers as in years gone by.

It was to this his last fortress that he had ordered Mercedes to convey his daughter, if she succeeded in obtaining her ; and it was here he awaited the return of his envoy.

Anxiously he watched from the ramparts of the fortress for the appearance of the duenna. Hour after hour passed on, and yet no Mercedes came ; and the prince was beginning to despair, when a woman mounted on a mule appeared, followed by another, and four men.

It was Mercedes and Alma.

The young girl was dressed in dark gray, and wore over her shoulders a white cloak of fine goats' hair.

The prince gave vent to a cry of joy, and

hastened to the courtyard to meet them as they crossed the drawbridge.

So soon as they entered, and Alma had dismounted, the old man clasped her in his arms.

"My daughter, my poor child! how long have I not mourned for you!"

Alma allowed herself to be embraced by the old man, although she felt none of the yearning love which possessed him. Her heart was far away in the Abruzzi.

The stalwart form of Andrea rose before her in faney, the handsome face of Mario; nor were the bright eyes of Regina absent from her thoughts.

The old prinee, after having embraced his reclaimed daughter, stepped back a little to look at her.

An expression of doubt and anxiety came over his face.

"She does not resemble her mother," he said in a low voice. "No; she is like—she is like—" Then he paused, and cast an uneasy glanee on Mereedes; "she resembles—"

"Luerecia Mammona," said Mereedes in a whisper, audible only to the prinee.

"She is not my daughter," he said in low, angry tones.

"She is the daughter of Luerecia."

"Ah! and why, then, have you brought her here? This is not my child."

"My lord," said the woman, "years ago, by

your directions, I lied to Andrea Vitelli, and told him this was your daughter, the other that of his sister. You feared that otherwise, in some paroxysm of rage, he might kill Regina. Behold the fruit of the lie ! We dare not undeceive him. The vengeance of God and Andrea Vitelli pursues us."

"Curses on you, old hag !" growled the prince ; "it is you who are the cause of this."

"If I lied to Andrea Vitelli, it was by your order."

"You should have undeceived him to-day."

"Andrea Vitelli is not a man to be trifled with—**my** life would have paid the forfeit ; besides, he would not have believed me."

All this while Alma remained standing alone, and wondering at the altercation going on between her father and the duenna.

"Shall I not take this young girl to her apartments ?" said Mercedes, who was the first to notice the embarrassment of Alma.

"You are right," said the prince gloomily, turning his regard to Alma, who stood pale, disconsolate, with cast-down eyes and mournful look. "The girl is fair and gentle-looking. See she is well cared for, Mercedes."

Then another thought seemed to strike him ; for his brow grew black, and an indignant expression settled on his features, while he said in a whisper to Mercedes : "You have done well, since you could not have Regina, to bring this one. If Andrea Vitelli refuses to give me my child, I can at least

revenge myself on the daughter of his sister." Then, turning to Alma, he said : " My dear child, in the hope of your arrival, I have already given orders for a grand *fête* to take place in my palace at Spoleto. Go, attire yourself. The carriages and the escort will be ready to take us to Spoleto in an hour's time."

The prince had spared no cost in furnishing the castle with every luxury as well as every possible defence. The rooms were gorgeously hung with costly tapestry ; heavy carpets lay on the floors ; brilliant candelabra, supporting many candles, there were ; while hosts of servants ministered to every possible want. It seemed as though the prince, driven from all his other possessions, was determined to concentrate here at once all his wealth and all his powers of defence.

But all this splendour, in place of giving joy to the young girl, only caused her to look back regretfully to her mountain-home. She could not forget Mario, whom she loved ; Regina, with whom she had been brought up, and whom she looked on as a sister ; and lastly, Andrea Vitelli, so grand, so fierce and terrible, and yet withal so lovable.

Alma found a profusion of rich dresses provided for her, and, instructed by Mercedes, attired herself in readiness for the *fête*. The carriages were in waiting ; and amidst the blasts of trumpets, the shouts of the soldiers, the clanging of arms, and the glare of torches, the prince and his new-found

daughter drove off to the palace at Spoleto, escorted by some two hundred mounted men.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE FÊTE AT THE PALACE VITELLI.

A THOUSAND lights blazed in the Palace Vitelli ; strains of harmonious music thrilled the air ; rich dresses swept and rustled over the polished floor ; jewels gleamed and sparkled ; rich wine flowed in profusion ; and all was mirth and gaiety. Hercules Vitelli had gathered around him all the rank and wealth he could prevail on to accept his invitation. But though he endeavoured to appear at ease, a heavy, aching void was at his heart. On all hands he was congratulated on having recovered his daughter, and lavishly complimented on her beauty.

Alma, indeed, looked ravishingly beautiful. Dressed in pale-blue satin, her fair hair falling over her shoulders, her very pallor lent her additional charms ; and, as people gazed on her sad, mournful face, and soft, dreamy eyes, they exclaimed, “ How lovely ! ”

Guests kept arriving late into the night, the prince receiving each new-comer himself.

Presently the servant in waiting announced :

“ The Marquis Campirelli and the Countess Florian Valiero.”

Hercules Vitelli advanced from the end of the room to meet his guests, while a murmur ran around at the mention of the countess.

"Countess Valiero ! who is she ? a stranger to this part of Italy ?" asked one of the other.

"Tis a rich Roman dowager," said one.

"Nay, not so ; she is the sole remaining representative of an ancient and noble Sicilian family."

The entrance of the countess into the large hall silenced these inquiries and guesses, and all eyes were turned on her as she advanced towards the prince, leaning on the arm of the Marquis Campirelli.

She was indeed beautiful. Her black hair, soft and flossy as silk, floated in luxurious abundance over her white neck and bare shoulders. Her brilliant dark eyes swept around the room with a proud, triumphant glance. Dressed in dark velvet, fitting close to her graceful figure, and cut low across the bosom, the elegance of her shape was apparent to all. Her walk was undulating, majestic; her carriage superb; her small feet seeming to scorn the floor she trod on. Her hands and arms might have formed a study for a sculptor; whilst the clean-cut classic outlines of her features were irreproachable. The small mouth was wreathed in smiles, revealing the dazzling teeth between the half-open rich red lips. The thin nostrils seemed to betoken high rank and breeding; the arched brows, and grand, flashing eyes, a proud and haughty spirit.

Campirelli led her up to the prince, all making way for them, and gazing in mute admiration at the splendid beauty of the young girl.

"Prince Vitelli, allow me to present to you the Countess Florian Valiero."

Regina (for, as the reader knows, it was she), arching her graceful neck, bent her head slightly, while the prince bowed low before her. She scanned his form and face eagerly for a moment, while a singular gleam flashed from her dark eyes.

Hercules Vitelli, in turn, raised his eyes to her face, started, and staggered back, turning at the same time deadly pale.

"Great heavens! that face, that form! My dead wife, as I saw her thirty years ago."

Meanwhile the countess regarded him with affected wonder, her eyes resting curiously on the pale, wrinkled features of the old man.

"Prince, are you unwell?" asked the marquis, in surprise.

"No, no; 'tis nothing but a passing pain."

Then, again bowing low, he hurried away, but ever and anon his gaze would revert to the beautiful countess, as she strolled around the saloon, leaning on the arm of Campirelli.

"'Tis strange, 'tis marvellous! so singular a resemblance I never saw."

But by degrees the effect of this singular resemblance wore off; and not doubting that she was indeed the Countess Valiero, he never for a moment

imagined that he had been introduced to his own daughter. Presently he descried Alma shrinking up in a corner by herself, as though frightened at the unwonted splendour.

For appearance' sake he took his supposed daughter's arm, and walked round the rooms.

Presently they came face to face with Campire and the countess.

The instant Alma's eyes rested on her, a cry of astonishment broke from her :

“ Regina !”

With a rapid gesture, Regina signalled her to be silent.

“ What ails you ?” asked the prince.

“ I thought—I fancied—” muttered Alma, confusedly, “ that I saw some one I knew.”

Regina, darting a rapid glance of meaning at her, passed on.

Shortly after midnight, the company descended to a splendid repast, prepared in the great hall of the palace. The costliest wine flowed as freely as water, and soon, under its exhilarating effects, the mirth and gaiety of the company grew uproarious. Various topics of the day were discussed, and, among others, one which on all occasions never failed to be mentioned : that was, Bel Demonio and his achievements.

“ Gentlemen,” said an officer to those around him, “ you are speaking of Bel Demonio. I have some news to give you. The day before yesterday,

as I was riding home from a visit to the country I saw in the distance, rapidly approaching me, Bel Demonio and his band of blacks. With loud and fearful yells they galloped on towards me. I drew on one side of the road, and, unseen myself, had a good view of this dircful fiend. He wore a mask ; but I saw sufficient of his face to be convinced that he is not the hideous ogre report makes him. On the contrary, I am ready to avow that he is a young and handsome man, of rather low stature."

An expression of uneasiness and terror came over the prince's face at the mention of Bel Demonio.

" By the soul of my mother !" cried the gallant Capitano, who had been listening to what was said, in boisterous, bragging tones, " I should like nothing better than to meet this Bel Demonio, and measure swords with him."

As the wine flowed, the conversation grew more loud and animated. None could boast of having seen the face of this mysterious fiend ; but each had some anecdote concerning him. It was agreed on all hands that he was handsome as an angel, remorseless and cruel as a fiend. Many of the ladies had retired from the table, leaving the most invete-rate drinkers to finish their libations alone.

" A toast, a toast !" cried Capitano, rising to his feet, and holding aloft a goblet of wine. " Here is long life to Prince Hercules Vitelli, and death to Bel Demonio !"

The toast was drunk enthusiastically ; but scarcely had the words, “ Death to Bel Demonio !” died away, when a clear, clarion-like voice rang out from the great portal at the end :

“ Who dares drink death to Bel Demonio ?”

A perfect yell of terror and astonishment broke from all ; for there, in the doorway, stood a masked figure, dressed in black, a white cloak falling over his shoulders, a drawn sword in his hand ; and through the holes in his mask, his eyes seemed to gleam fiercely on the revellers.

“ Who dares say, ‘ Death to Bel Demonio ?’ again the shrill challenge rings out.

Prodigious was the confusion, great the terror which the cry “ Bel Demonio !” and the appearance of the masked bandit produced.

The shrieks of the ladies, the clattering of glass, the clang of arms, and the tramp of many feet, made up a scene of terrible uproar.

So great was the consternation, that it was fully half a minute before any one thought of attacking the bold intruder. But soon some snatched their arms, carbines, pistols, and swords, and advanced towards the doorway where the figure had stood.

But Bel Demonio had vanished.

Now the noise redoubled, and those who before had been silent from terror, made the air ring with their defiant shouts.

“ Death to Bel Demonio !” shouted the gallant

Capitano. "Death to the brigand! Follow him, my men! Cut him to pieces!"

Capitano, however, though urging others on, was careful not to be in the race. A number of gentlemen, swords in hand, now rushed through the doorway by which the figure had disappeared.

"A guard on all the palace-gates!" cried the prince. "He cannot have escaped. Search till he be found. A thousand ducats for his body, dead or alive!"

The soldiers of the prince, and the gentlemen his guests, now ran in all directions, up staircases, down corridors, probing tapestry with their swords, in vain efforts to discover the cause of all the tumult.

Suddenly there rang out a succession of piercing shrieks, coming from a distant part of the palace. Instantly some dozen rushed, sword in hand, towards the spot whence the sounds proceeded. The Marquis Campirelli was foremost among these, not with any intention of capturing the brigand, but rather of aiding his escape, for Regina had thrown out some hints that, if Bel Demonio were to appear in the course of the evening, he need not be surprised.

Running quickly on through several long corridors, he came to a wide staircase leading to the basement. Down this he darted, and turning sharp to the left, came suddenly on Regina, or rather the Countess Valiero.

She was standing in the doorway of a chamber, and appeared agitated and alarmed.

‘ What is it, countess ?’ asked Campirelli ; “ what has alarmed you ?”

“ Bel Demonio !” she faltered, affecting extreme terror. “ Ah, gentlemen, I had retired to my room for a few moments to arrange my hair, when the door was suddenly burst open. I turned, and a figure draped in a white cloak stood at the door. With a cry of alarm, I darted on one side ; then the man—or phantom, whichever it was—leaped through the window, and vanished !”

So saying, the countess pointed to the open window, which was not more than five feet from the ground. It opened on to the courtyard at the back of the palace, whence escape was easy.

“ Escaped, escaped !” was now the cry from the crowd assembled around the doorway. “ Bel Demonio has escaped through the window of the chamber of the Countess Valiero.”

“ Quick, Capitano ! mount, and take a dozen men, and seour the plain around the tower : he cannot have gone far. A thousand ducats for the head of Bel Demonio !”

“ Ah, see yonder !” the countess exclaimed, pointing through the open window. “ Marquis Campirelli, Prince Vitelli, enter and look out.”

The marquis and Hercules obeyed, and looking out, saw in the clear moonlight the figures of some score of mounted men galloping off in the distance. As they gazed, they heard wild shouts and cries borne on the wind.

"As well think to chain the wind as capture Bel Demonio!"

"A spirit—an evil spirit; a phantom from below, sent to punish me for my crimes," muttered the prince to himself.

The search was given up, and soon the guests began to depart, for the apparition of Bel Demonio had effectually quenched all mirth.

CHAPTER XXVI.

REGINA'S JEALOUS RAGE.

THERE seemed to have fallen a blight on the castle of Andrea Vitelli since the departure of the gentle Alma. The rough soldiers missed her kind voice, so often raised in intercession for them; the sick and wounded missed her tender hand, her ministering care. The old men and women lacked many little comforts, and the children many pleasures, since her room in the turret had been vacant.

Andrea Vitelli buried himself in gloomy seclusion; for hours together he would remain seated at the head of the great table, rapt in his own sombre thoughts. Frequently he would start up as from a dream, and would shout to the sentry at the door to "Send the lady Alma!" but, remembering himself, would sigh deeply, and again relapse into reverie.

As for Mario, he, too, seemed to have lost all life

and spirit. He was absent from the castle nearly all day, and invariably avoided the chief.

Thus an estrangement sprang up between father and son, who, before the miserable day when Alma was exiled, were on the most cordial terms.

Regina, too, was more and more away. Her mysterious excursions grew not only more frequent, but longer in duration, till Andrea, who, while Alma was there, had never noticed her absence, grew restless and uneasy.

To all intents and purposes he was alone, although the castle contained some five hundred souls, who all called him lord. And this was brought about simply by the absence of a young girl, whose presence had scarcely been noticed, so much had it been looked on as a matter of course. People noted not the genial influence she exercised, the light her gentle presence threw around, more than they would the light and warmth of the sun. But now that she was gone, the void she left was bitterly felt.

One morning, about an hour after sunrise, Regina rode into the courtyard of the fortress. People had now ceased to think about her incomings and outgoings ; nor did any body trouble themselves to ask whither she had been thus early.

Dismounting, and throwing the rein to a soldier, sh was about entering the castle, when she met Mario face to face. His looks were pale, sombre, gloomy ; he walked with his head down, his eyes cast on the ground.

Regina stopped before him, and looked at his pale, sad face. He raised his eyes, and smiling faintly, said, with affected gaiety :

“ You are early this morning, sweet cousin mine.”

“ Good morning, cousin Mario! You look charmingly amiable,” said Regina satirically.

Mario tried to laugh it off, but she continued :

“ What ails you, cousin Mario? Has your lady-love played you false? Has she bestowed her smiles on another?”

“ Truly, cousin,” cried Mario, with a gesture of impatience, “ it is a fine thing for you to speak of love, when you have this night been receiving the homage and gallantry of all the young nobles of Spoleto; for have you not but now returned from one of your excursions?”

“ And what of it?” asked Regina.

“ Oh, nothing!” he replied. “ It is not I that shall go there to seek you, or spoil your pleasures.”

“ No, Mario!” she replied warmly; “ but there was a time—which, if you have forgotten, I have not—there was a time when you were only too happy, too glad, to serve me, to cavalier me, to protect me against the attacks of enemies; but now, Mario, you avoid me, you withhold from me your confidence; you have ceased to love me.”

“ No,” said Mario impatiently, “ it is not so, cousin Regina. I have never betrayed your confidence; and as for my protection, you want it not. Heaven knows, that would be superfluous! You are

brave and intrepid as a man, Regina, and might put to shame some of those in the service of my father."

Regina made a gesture of pique and impatience, but preserved sufficient command over her countenance to smile ; still anger burned in her heart, for she had hoped, now Alma was gone, to secure the love of Mario for herself. His words, his manner, his obvious coolness, dispelled that dream.

"So be it, cousin mine," she said. "We understand each other. Let there be war between us. Your thoughts are with our enemies, and I can do no better than seek in my uncle an ally against his son."

Then, with an ironical bow, she passed him and ascended the staircase, not giving him an opportunity to reply ; but apparently a sudden thought struck her, for she turned, and retracing her steps, went out to the portcullis, and watched her cousin's retreating figure.

"I will follow him. A thought, prompted by I know not what, tells me to watch where he goes. Who knows ? Perchance to Spolcto. He may have established a communication with Alma. If so"—and she knit her brows at the thought—"it shall fare ill with her, at least."

But Mario's movements seemed to belie her suspicions, for he wandered listlessly about. Regina, following at a convenient distance, kept him constantly in sight. Presently she started, and gave vent to an exclamation ; for her quick eye noted,

among some brushwood by the side of the mountain-path, the flutter of a woman's robe.

Whoever it might be, it was evident she wished to avoid observation, seeming to hover about, as though wishing, yet fearing, to accost him. Presently, after he had passed, the figure of a woman emerged from the brushwood, and came out into the path behind him.

"The dark woman!" cried Regina; "the witch of the mountains! Heaven protect us! what wants she with Mario?"

Regina, like many in the castle, held this singular female in great terror, and for the moment she seemed half inclined to go back; but, quickly conquering the impulse, she kept on her course, following the mysterious woman and Mario.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DARK WOMAN.

MARIO had no definite object in view when he left the castle, but merely came out to stroll around, and indulge his melancholy in solitude. He had no idea that his beautiful cousin was watching him; indeed, he would scarcely have noticed her had she been by his side, so rapt was he in his own sad thoughts. He wandered on, not heeding whither he went, till the rustle of a dress behind him, and quick footsteps, caused him to start and turn hastily.

"Ha!" he cried, laying his hand on his dagger, "the witch of the mountains! the dark woman! Begone, hag! What want you here? Cast not your spells on me, or I'll cancel them with my dagger's point."

The poor woman, pale, haggard-looking, and wretched, was, one would think, a most unlikely object to excite terror, and yet the ignorance and superstition of the mountaineers had caused her to be branded as a pestilent witch.

Clasping her hands before her humbly, she said:

"Nay, signor, be not angry: I mean you no harm; and even if I did, what could a poor, feeble, miserable woman do?"

"A black heart and a spirit powerful for evil may yet live in a feeble woman's body. So begone, and trouble me no more! 'Tis not the first time I have noted you hovering about me. Begone! I say."

"Hear me, signor."

"Begone!"

He drew a pistol from his belt and pointed it at her head.

"Vanish, witch of hell! or I'll test your invulnerability."

"Signor, signor, I have a message for you."

"Take your message back to Satan, your master," he cried angrily.

"Nay, signor, 'tis not from Satan—rather from an angel of light; the lady—"

"Ha ! what lady ?"

"The lady Alma."

"You have a message from the lady Alma !" he cried, his eyes suddenly beaming with joy. " Speak, good woman ! your pardon for my words. But stay, how know I this is not some devilish plot ?"

" You will not believe me ?" she said mournfully.

" Alas ! then, I must return without fulfilling my promise."

She turned away sadly, as if to leave ; but now he stopped her.

" Stay ! You have, you say, a message from the lady Alma. Where is she ?"

" With the Prince Vitelli."

" At his palace of Spoleto ?"

" No ; at his castle on the plain ; but she is in Spoleto nearly every day. They say she is to wed the Marquis Milano."

A cry of fury escaped Mario.

" Your message, woman—quick !"

" The lady Alma is very unhappy ; she pines for her mountain-home."

" She wishes to see me !" he cried eagerly. " Speak ! is it not so ? She has sent you to me ?"

" The lady Alma is only allowed to leave the castle closely escorted, for the prince fears lest she should communicate with her friends in the mountains."

" Is that the message she sent me ?" he asked impatiently.

“A woman can read a woman’s heart. The lady Alma sent no message.”

“Ha! then you have been fooling me?”

“Not so. I have seen her. She is wretched. We have conversed of you. I know she longs to see you.”

“How can I see her? when and where? You say she is not suffered to leave the castle, and ‘twere death for me to venture there.”

“Her chamber-window looks forth on the parapet facing the west, the bastion from which floats the standard of Prince Vitelli. Although the moat is deep, the parapet is low, and easily scaled.”

“But the sentry?”

“On each alternate night the lover of Marina, her waiting-maid, is on duty. He drinks freely, and frequently sleeps at his post. The window of the lady Alma is the first from the angle of the castle, facing the flagstaff. All the other chambers on the same face are untenanted. Dare you venture?”

“Dare I? Ay, that I dare! Alma, this very night I will again press you to my heart!”

“Adieu, signor; and remember, that for once the hated, despised, and feared recluse has done you good service. Think not so harshly for the future of the dark woman.”

Before he could give her a message in return, or even thank her, she was gone.

“How know I this is not a trap—a plot to compass my destruction? No matter; were all the fiends

of hell in my path, I would make the attempt. Alma, dear Alma, once again I shall see you!"

Then, with a lighter heart and more elastic step, he turned and made his way back to the castle. Once he fancied he saw a woman's dress before him, but thought he might have been deceived. He little knew that Regina had watched his interview with the dark woman ; and though she had been unable to hear the conversation, she had guessed that it referred to Alma ; for once or twice the woman had pointed in the direction of Spoleto, and this Regina's jealous mind interpreted as a message bidding him to meet her.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SECRET INTERVIEW.

THE night was clear, calm, and beautiful, as nights usually are in Italy. The moon and stars shone brilliantly, flooding the landscape in soft silver light. It was one of those splendid nights that Salvator loved to discourse of in his charming stanzas. Alma stood at the open window, looking out on the moonlit scene, towards those mountains which she loved so well, and where she had passed her happy girlhood. Her maid, Marina, stood by her side, and occasionally the two young girls, mistress and servant, spoke together.

The window of Alma's chamber looked out upon

the parapet, beyond which lay an open plain, bounded on the left by thick trees and brushwood. As she gazed pensively out on the calm scene, a figure emerged from the shadow of the trees, and, walking towards the ramparts, seemed to be calmly and fearlessly surveying the strength of the place. He advanced yet nearer. The moon shone full upon him, and, as he turned his face towards her, Alma gave vent to a sharp cry.

“What ails my lady?” asked Marina; “is she ill, or is it that that man who so daringly inspects the prince’s castle alarms her? Shall I call the attention of the sentry? he will soon put the audacious fellow to flight with a bullet.”

“No, no!” cried Alma in agitated tones; “it was nothing, Marina—only a passing pang. I shall be better anon. Retire to bed. I shall wait awhile at the window.”

Thus ordered, the waiting-maid was forced to obey, and went to her bed, which was in a little room adjoining Alma’s. Her woman’s curiosity was aroused, however, and she much wondered what caused her mistress’s sudden exclamation, and whether it was the strange man who so boldly walked around the defences.

Alma, so soon as Marina had retired, opened her window yet wider. Without doubt, the slight noise she made in doing this attracted the attention of the strange man, for the instant he saw her figure at the window he gave vent to a cry of joy.

Then he advanced to the edge of the moat, and seemed to be judging its depth with a view to descending and climbing up the opposite side. It was steep—full twenty-five feet deep ; the sides were wet and slippery, while the bottom was covered with water.

Nevertheless, the stranger commenced at once to descend the steep side of the moat. By the aid of his poniard he clambered down, and safely arrived at the bottom. He was up to his knees in water, but, heedless of this, he waded across, and at once commenced to ascend, again using his poniard to assist him. The wall he had to climb was old and crumbling, and several times, from the stones giving way, in the joints of which he had inserted his dagger's point, he was precipitated to the bottom. Nothing daunted, however, he persevered, again and again returning to the task, till at last success crowned his efforts, and he was enabled to raise his head above the parapet, and look around on the ramparts. An expression of satisfaction came over his features. He saw, at a distance of some thirty paces, the sentinel seated, leaning against a buttress, his musket by his side, fast asleep.

Noiselessly he raised himself by his hands on to the parapet, and rising to his feet, walked rapidly but quietly towards the window.

Alma followed him with her eyes, almost breathless with emotion. With fearful anxiety she turned her eyes first on him, then on the sentinel, who still slept, but who might at any moment awake.

She saw him, for whose safety she was in such mortal terror, safely scale the parapet ; she saw him pass the sentinel without awaking him ; and the next moment he stood beside her window.

“Alma !” said a well-remembered voice.

“Mario !” and opening the window, she stepped out, and was clasped in his arms.

For a moment they remained thus, but were awakened from their dream of love by the voice of Marina. “Ah !” Alma heard her say ; “I heard voices. Mademoiselle, where are you ?”

Alma hastily stepped back into her chamber, but was not in time to prevent Marina coming to the window, and catching sight of Mario. “A man ! a man ! great heavens, a man !” she cried.

“Silence, Marina ! for my sake, for the love of Heaven, be silent ! It is my cousin Mario. If the sentinel hears you, he is lost.”

“Ah ! pardon, mademoiselle ; do not fear,” replied Marina, at once understanding the situation.

At that moment the clock struck the midnight hour.

“Ah !” cried Marina, “in five minutes the sentry will be changed. Fly, signor ! or you will be discovered !”

“Oh, fly, fly, dear Mario !” cried Alma also ; “fly, or you are lost !”

But Mario, despite his danger, seemed loth to leave.

“Mario, this is madness ! If you love me, do

not condemn me to perpetual misery by sacrificing your life. Live, Mario ! live for me, I implore you !”

“I will, Alma ! I will !” he cried, again straining her to his heart, and kissing her lips. “When shall I visit you again ?”

“The night after to-morrow. The corporal Murillo will be on sentry-duty. Murillo is a good fellow, but stupid. I will give him wine ; he will sleep till I awake him ; and I, the while, will keep guard.”

“Adieu, Alma !” said Mario, once again embracing her ; “the next night but one. At what hour ?”

“At half-past two,” said Marina quickly. “Hark ! the tramp of the guard. Go ! quick, for your life !”

“Adieu !” murmured Alma.

The next instant Mario leaped into the fosse, and clambered up the other side. Scarcely had he done so, than the sentinel, awakened by the tramp of the guard, arose to his feet and looked around :

“I thought I heard voices,” he murmured ; “’twas but a dream, I suppose.”

“Ah, *mon Dieu* ! what is that ?” cried Marina, grasping the arm of her mistress, turning pale with terror, and pointing with her finger to the plain.

Alma followed the direction, and saw, moving across the plain, a body of horsemen, led by one who galloped some twenty yards in advance. They all

wore flowing white cloaks ; and Alma noted with terror, as the moon shone on their faces, that they were blacks.

“ Bel Demonio !” she cried. “ Heaven defend us ! and grant that he may not have seen Mario.”

Bel Demonio and his band soon disappeared from their view, and Alma and Marina retired to rest. A vague feeling of alarm and presentiment of coming disaster pervaded the young girl’s heart, and it was dawn ere she sank to sleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE AMBUSCADE.

“ Oh, mademoiselle !” cried Marina to her mistress, entering hurriedly, as the latter was seated at the window of her chamber ; “ such terrible news ! Heaven send your handsome cousin may fail in his appointment to-night !”

“ Why, Marina, does danger menace ?”

“ Danger ? Ruin ! death ! I heard the prince give orders to Senor Capitano to be ready with fifty men, to keep them concealed within the gateway, and, at the sound of a horn, to rush forth and kill or capture every one found in the neighbourhood of the castle.”

“ Holy Virgin protect him ! He is coming to-night ! How can I warn him ?” cried Alma distractedly.

The clock struck the midnight hour, and still the two girls were at their post, earnestly talking over the impending danger to Mario, but totally unable to devise any means of reaching him.

It was true the Corporal Murillo, Marina's lover, came on sentry-duty at two o'clock, and the faithful, or rather faithless, girl had prepared for him a cup of wine, which could not fail to send him into a deep sleep. That was all they could do. Two o'clock came ; the sentinel was relieved, and, so soon as the guard had gone, Marina stepped from the window on to the parapet. Corporal Murillo gladly partook of the wine, and Marina, after allowing him to steal a kiss, left him, and returned to her mistress. In less than a quarter of an hour he was in a sound sleep. Then Alma stepped out on to the parapet, and anxiously looked out on the plain for Mario, hoping earnestly he would not come. Her heart sunk within her as she presently descried his figure emerge from the shadow of the wood, and advance rapidly towards the moat. It was in vain she waved her handkerchief, as a signal for him to retreat. He took it as a welcome, and, hurrying on, leaped into the moat, climbed the other side, and stood beside her on the parapet. The next moment he clasped her in his arms.

“ Mario, Mario !” she murmured, pale and trembling with terror ; “ fly ! oh, fly ! You are in danger.”

“ Danger, my sweet one ? I would risk death for your sake !”

" You do risk it, Mario. Oh! for Heaven's sake, seek safety in flight!"

" What mean you, Alma? All is still. No sound breaks the silence of night. See, the sentry is asleep. Why should I fly?"

" Hush, Mario, hush! for the love of Heaven, or you will awake him. Come farther away from him, and I will explain. There is not a moment to be lost!"

" On the contrary, I prefer to converse nearer to our friend, the sleeping sentry," said Mario contemptuously.

" Why, Mario?"

" Because, should he awake, I can then the easier kill him before he can raise an alarm."

Then he drew her with him, unresisting, for she was weak, and trembling with excessive fear for his safety.

" Now, Alma, explain."

" Mario, an ambuscade is laid," she said earnestly. "I know not if it is for you, but if any one is found about the castle, he is to be killed or captured. At the sound of a horn, fifty men will rush out from their concealment and surround the place. Then escape will be all but hopeless."

Scarcely were the words out of her mouth, when the clear notes of a horn rang out on the night. The sound seemed to come from the little wood whence Mario had appeared.

The clang of arms and the tramp of men followed instantaneously.

“ Fly, Mario ; fly, for your life !”

Imprinting one last kiss on her lips, Mario turned, and, mounting swiftly to the edge of the parapet, leaped boldly into the fosse ; and Alma sank fainting to the ground.

Mario crossed the fosse, and mounted the opposite bank in safety. Then he commenced running with his utmost speed, hoping to reach the shelter of the wood safely. But the fortress, before so still and quiet, now seemed alive with armed men. Shouts and cries rent the air, and so soon as the figure of the fugitive was discerned running across the moonlit space, the reports of carbines and the whizzing balls told him that his death or capture was resolved on.

Alma, with a desperate effort, partially raised herself, and watched her lover’s flight. He had passed over nearly half the distance, when, with a piercing shriek, she again fell to the ground in a swoon.

Mario was seen to stagger, and then fall backwards. He had been struck by one or more of the bullets of his enemies. But he quickly rose to his feet again, and, though painfully and slowly, for he was badly wounded, endeavoured to pursue his course. But now there issued from the castle soldiers in scores, running towards him from all directions. He glanced around him, and then, seeing he could not hope to escape, turned, and stood like a wounded stag at bay. He was almost instantly sur-

rounded ; but, drawing his sword, he bade them keep their distance. He was determined, since they seemed determined to kill him, to sell his life dearly.

“ Surrender ! throw down your sword !” cried an officer.

“ Take it !” cried Mario, fiercely lunging at him.

Capitano, for it was he, sprang backwards to a safe distance.

“ Take him alive, soldiers ! Our orders are to take him alive.”

Then there seemed to close on him on every side a wall of steel. Further resistance was hopeless.

“ Surrender !” again cried Capitano.

“ My life shall be spared ?”

“ For the present, yes. You will be carried before the prince.”

Mario threw down his sword, and, folding his arms, gazed with an expression of scorn on his captors. He was instantly seized, and, guarded by a soldier on each side, another in front and behind, was marched back to the fortress. On their way to the gate, they had to pass the rampart on which Alma’s window opened. Raising his eyes, he saw there the young girl kneeling on the parapet, her hands clasped, her hair dishevelled ; tears streamed down her fair cheeks, and he could see her lips move in prayer.

“ Do not grieve for me, dear Alma,” Mario cried,

raising his voice ; “at least we shall be near each other.”

Then they passed, and he disappeared from her gaze beneath the frowning portcullis.

Mario was taken into the castle, and at once conducted to the presence of the prince. The old man regarded him vindictively for some time.

“So, son of my enemy—viper’s spawn—at last I have you in my power ! Ha, ha ! now I will make Andrea feel my vengeance ! What is to prevent my hanging you forthwith from the turret ?”

“Fear of my father’s vengeance,” said Mario, boldly looking him in the face.

“So, ho ! ’tis a saucy young galliard, it seems. We will see if we cannot tame this spirit of thine. Away with him to the dungeon beneath the moat. Chain him to a pillar; give him bread-and-water once a day only. There you shall remain, son of Andrea Vitelli, until your father has made restitution, and complied with all my demands.”

“That will never be ! My father will hang the messengers you send, and take his own vengeance,” interrupted Mario fearlessly.

Hercules Vitelli turned somewhat pale; for he, too, had thought on the bandit’s vengeance when he heard his son was a captive.

“Then you, his son, shall remain in your dungeon until—until”—he paused, and seemed to gloat over the suspense he caused—“until you are led forth to execution !”

" You dare not, murderous tyrant !" shouted Mario fiercely. " Your own ignominious death would too shortly follow, and you know it ! "

" Away with him !" the prince cried, furious at his audacity.

Then Mario was dragged away, and consigned to his noxious dungeon.

" And now," continued the prince, " send hither the lady Alma ; I would speak with her."

In a short time Alma entered, pale and tearful, with faltering steps.

The old man regarded her moodily, cynically, in silence, for some time. " So it seems, mademoiselle, that, in reclaiming you from the wild mountains, I have but nestled a viper in my bosom."

" Mercy, mercy !" she cried, falling on her knees ; " mercy ! not for me, but for him ! "

" Such mercy as Andrea Vitelli has shown me and mine shall be meted to him. His son's life is justly forfeit : he must die ! "

" Oh, sir, have pity ! and if you have no pity, at least think on what manner of man is Andrea Vitelli. Should harm befall his son, whom he dearly loves, oceans of blood, the slaughter of a whole province, would not appease his vengeance. His fury will be terrible, almost as terrible as the wrath of Heaven ! "

Hercules Vitelli had a coward's heart. He had before thought of this, and probably would not dare to carry his threat into execution.

"No matter ; I defy him : he must die ! Now I have to deal with you. Think not, Alma, that I shall much longer keep about me one who delights to harbour my enemies."

"Ah ! you will send me back to the mountains?" she said, a gleam of joy lighting up her features.

"Not so," he replied, with a mocking smile. "I have other news for you. The Count de Santa Fioro has made an offer for your hand ; you shall marry him."

A sharp cry of anguish came from Alma.

"You shall marry him, I say ; and thus I shall at one and the same time get rid of you, and conciliate a powerful noble with whom I have not lately been on the best terms."

"Mercy, mercy ! spare me, prince !"

"You shall marry the Count de Santa Fioro."

Alma arose from her knees : pale and defiant she stood before him ; her gentle nature seemed all at once to have grown fierce and determined.

"That will I never do ! I will suffer death myself first with him, or kill you. So now, Prince Vitelli, you know my determination."

The prince was rather astonished at this ebullition of temper from the gentle Alma.

"We will see, we will see. I say, you shall marry him."

"And I say, I will never marry him, or any other than Mario Vitelli !"

"As to that last affair, I will soon put it beyond

your power. If you refuse to marry Santa Fioro, I will hang your lover, Mario Vitelli, from the ramparts."

A cry of horror broke from Alma at the terrible utterance.

CHAPTER XXX.

ALMA RECEIVES A MYSTERIOUS WARNING.

THE prince lost no time in presenting to Alma her suitor.

On the following day, Mercedes came herself into Alma's chamber, and desired her to attire herself with great care, for that the prince wished to see her.

Scarcely knowing what she was doing, Alma suffered herself to be arrayed in a silk brocaded dress, and was led by the duenna into the grand reception-room.

She found there the prince, and a dark, middle-aged man, of medium stature.

"Alma, this is the Count of Santa Fioro. He has done me the honour to ask your hand of me, and I have seen fit to grant his request."

Alma did not venture to reply, but simply bowed, and asked permission to retire, pleading, as an excuse, that she was indisposed. Her pale, careworn appearance seemed to bear out her words; and, as the count seconded her request, Hercules consented, though with an ill grace.

Alma had been in the habit, nearly every day,

of walking in the immediate neighbourhood of the castle. It was impossible she could stroll far, for a chain of sentries was posted to prevent this. On this particular day she had scarcely gone a hundred yards on her walk, accompanied by Marina, when a woman advanced from the shadow of a tree, and came directly towards her.

She instantly recognised the dark woman.

"Oh," cried the latter, "I am so glad to have met you! For three days I have hovered about the castle, in the hope of doing so."

"What is it, my poor woman?" said Alma kindly, for she always pitied the lonely wanderer.

"It is this, my child: my heart trembles for you. A great danger threatens you!"

"A danger!" said Alma. "Is it of Mario you speak?"

"Alas, no; not of Mario,—I know he is a prisoner; but it is of Regina."

"Regina, my sister,—does danger threaten her?"

"No, my child; but danger threatens you; and it is Regina you have to fear."

"Regina! Explain yourself. Impossible! Regina, my sister, whom I so love?"

"And I also have loved her," said the woman mournfully.

"But can this be true? What have I to fear from Regina?"

"You love Mario?"

"Ah, yes, with all my heart."

“Regina knows you love Mario!”

“Is it so?”

“It is. More! Regina also loves Mario!”

“Alas, that by my love I should make my sister unhappy! for I have always looked upon Regina as a dear sister. And think you that Mario loves her?”

“Perhaps; I know not. In any case, she loves Mario, and the greatest danger threatens you; for Regina is fierce and implacable when crossed in her desires: no obstacle daunts her; no terror withholds her. She would sacrifice all to gratify her passion, and since you have become an obstacle in her path, she will assuredly kill you.”

“Ah! it is impossible! Regina, whom I have so loved, would not so act.”

“It is true. She will assuredly carry out her purpose, unless you do one thing.”

“What is that?”

“Promise me no longer to love Mario.”

“Alas! it is impossible.”

“At least, seem not to love him.”

“It is very hard,” said Alma mournfully; “but I will try.”

“Promise to see him no more; ‘tis best for you both.”

Alma thought for a short time, and then said:

“Alas! I think you speak truly. If I continue to love him, he must die; for if I refuse to wed the Count Santa Fioro, Mario will be executed. The prince has said it.”

"And if he continues to love you, you must die. Promise me, then, to see him no more, to think of him no more. Thus you will save your life and his own."

"For my life I care nothing, but to save his I will relinquish him for ever."

"Adieu, my child; may God protect you!"

"Shall I not see you again?"

"You will often see me again. I will do my best to watch over your safety, and warn you when danger threatens."

Alma returned to the castle sad and pensive. All looked dark and dreary before her. Her love—a love pure and chaste—she must relinquish; and, even to save the life of Mario, must wed a man whom she loved not. Then, too, the words of the dark woman respecting Regina had filled her with sorrow; for, in spite of all, she dearly loved Regina, her companion from childhood.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ALMA'S OATH.

THE Count of Santa Fioro, charmed by the grace and beauty of Alma, and backed by the consent of the prince, did not fail to press his suit ardently. Poor Alma had but little respite, and between the distasteful lover and the cruel, cynical prince, who constantly held above her head the dismal fate in store for Mario, existence became to her wretched life but a name.

One morning, as she sat on the battlements, wearily looking out on the mountains she loved so well, the prince approached, and, after regarding her frowningly for a moment or so, said, in harsh tones :

" Young lady—Alma Vitelli—see you yon turret ?"

She looked up ; it was the turret from which the castle-bell tolled forth to which he pointed ; she bowed her assent silently.

" I have commanded you to marry the Count of Santa Fioro ; you have refused. Do you still persist in that refusal ?"

" How can I marry a man I do not love, when—when—"

" When you love another, you would say. Is it not so ?"

She made no reply.

" No matter ; you will not answer, but nevertheless I know. Now mark my words : to-morrow, at sunset, the body of the man you love will swing from the gibbet on yonder turret. To-morrow eve, Mario, son of Andrea Vitelli, dies !"

She fell on her knees.

" Mercy! mercy! Prince, father, spare him !"

" Father !" He laughed bitterly as he said the word. " A pretty daughter, forsooth ! You ask for him ; ay, his life is in your own hands. Consent to wed the count, and I pledge my princely word he shall live."

Alma remained kneeling, with clasped hands, before him.

"O Mario, Mario!" she murmured; "what a terrible sacrifice is demanded of me! Guide me, Heaven! Holy Saints, direct me! On the one hand a hateful marriage; on the other, the death of him I love!"

The prinee remained gazing on her, with folded arms and knit brow.

"Your answer?" he said sternly.

She arose to her feet, pale and beautiful as a statue.

"If I consent to wed the count, will you pledge your word that Mario shall go free?"

"The life of Mario Vitelli shall be spared."

"No, no; that is not enough. Shall have liberty as well as life; shall be free to go where he pleases—free as our own mountain-air."

"Once again, his life shall be spared. I will promise no more. I give you till to-morrow evening to think of it. At sunset he shall be led forth to his death."

With these words, Hercules Vitelli turned and left her to her own miserable thoughts.

* * * * *

"Once again, count, I have no heart to give you. How can you press me?"

The voice was that of Alma, in reply to the passionate suit of her admirer, the Count of Sant Fioro.

"But can you give me no hope? Can you not, in time at least, love me a little?"

"Love!" she said bitterly; "I am too miserable to think of love. Is it not enough that my own cousin, with whom I have been brought up as with a brother, now lies in one of these hideous dungeons?"

"As a brother only, Alma?" asked the count.
She made no reply.

"Perhaps you love this cousin?" he continued.

"Perhaps I do."

"Would his liberty give you pleasure? Would it cause you to feel grateful to me, if no more? Might I then presume, some day, to hope?"

Alma's pale cheek coloured, and her eye lighted up, as she listened to the count's words.

"Count of Santa Fioro," she said, "my cousin lies condemned to death by my stern parent. He offered to spare his life on the condition of my wedding you."

"And you refused?" asked Santa Fioro in a tone of despair.

"I refused; for he made the promise with a reservation. Life to Mario would be worthless without liberty. He would prefer to die rather than to linger on the remainder of his days immured in a gloomy prison; and such I know would be his fate, from the fact of the prince refusing to grant his liberty as one of the conditions."

"Alma, supposing that this night your cousin

were free as air ; that myself found the means for his freedom ; supposing this, I say, could you then wed me ?”

Alma remained silent for some time.

“ Can you do this, count ? ” she said fervently.

“ I can, and will, if you will give me your solemn promise to be my wife.”

“ First, tell me how you would compass his freedom ; then I will give you my answer.”

“ Thus : Many of the prince’s soldiers are old retainers of my family, men on my estates. All are accessible to bribes. I am wealthy. I know nearly all. The turnkey would for a sum of money give me the keys, and, to escape his master’s vengeance, seek safety in one of my castles, where Hercules dared not, even if he would, follow him. I will gain the keys, bribe the guards, provide a soldier’s uniform and armour as a disguise, and ere morn, if you so will, your cousin shall be free. Once he is safe, I will boldly inform the prince that it was I who freed him, as the only way to gain you. He will be furious ; but his anger will subside. He dare not quarrel with me.”

Again Alma remained for some time in deep thought.

“ The scheme seems feasible, count,” she said.

“ It is certain to succeed. Will you give me your promise ? ”

“ I have no love to give you, count,” she replied ; “ but if you will do this thing, I will be your bride.”

"Good. Meet me in an hour's time, and I will return and give you full particulars."

Alma retired to the solitude of her chamber, and there, for nearly the space of an hour, she alternately gave vent to her grief in tears, and sought solace from Heaven in prayers.

"I have succeeded," said the count, when he met her at the expiration of the hour. "All is arranged, and this night your cousin shall be free. Meet me at the foot of the grand staircase one hour after midnight. You do not wish to draw back from our bargain?"

"I have promised," she replied in bitter tones. "I will meet you, as you say. My maid Marina will accompany me. I can trust her."

"Good!" said the count. "I will await you, with the soldier's habiliments and the keys."

* * * * *

The hour, the eventful hour, struck, which was to be the signal of freedom to Mario Vitelli, and the knell of all Alma's earthly hopes of happiness. A terrible struggle raged in her breast. She was about to make the most sublime sacrifice which a loving woman could: at one and the same time, she was about to rescue her lover from impending death, restore him to liberty, renounce him for ever, and chain herself to a man whom she disliked.

The Count of Santa Fioro was punctual to his appointment. He met them in the great vestibule, at the foot of the staircase. The dull flame of the

lamp Alma carried cast a dim, flickering light on the gloomy space, with its frowning pillars. The count advanced, carrying a complete suit of soldier's accoutrements, which he placed in the hands of Marin who followed her mistress. Then he turned Alma :

"Here are the keys," he said ; "you know the cell. No one will molest you : I have arranged that."

Alma took the heavy keys in silence.

"You do not shrink from your word ?" asked the count doubtfully.

"I have promised," was the reply.

"Will you swear it ?"

"You doubt me," she said sadly. "Yes ; to please you, I will swear it."

"Wait one moment," said the marquis in a low tone; "let us have no misunderstanding. You swear to relinquish Mario Vitelli for ever ?"

"I swear to relinquish him, unless you should choose to release me from my vow."

"Good. You swear you will tell him so : tell him that he must relinquish all hope of you ?"

"Is that necessary ?" asked Alma pitifully.

"It is."

"I swear it."

"Furthermore, you will swear to be my wife at any time I may demand you, beyond a month from this date."

"So soon ?" murmured the poor girl.

“ Yes.”

“ I swear.”

“ Repeat after me : ‘ I swear to do all these things, by the Cross of Christ, and by my hopes of salvation.’ ”

Alma shuddered.

“ Must I ?”

“ As you please,” said the count, putting forth his hand to take back the keys.

“ No, no ; I will swear.”

Then she repeated the words : “ *I swear by the Cross of Christ, and by my hopes of salvation.* ”

CHAPTER XXXII.

WITH the exception of Alma, Marina, Santa Fioro, and the few sentinels without, all in the castle were buried in sleep.

Alma, carrying the lamp, led the way to the circular staircase, at the foot of which were the dungeons, and began to descend. Marina followed, staggering beneath the weight of the armour, helmet, and clothes she carried.

Arrived at the bottom of the staircase, they proceeded along a narrow, dark, and damp passage, till they came to the door of the last dungeon. Alma inserted the great key, and, not without difficulty, turned it in the lock. Then, holding the lamp above her head, she softly opened the door. When she

entered, Mario was lying on some straw, at the foot of a pillar, fast asleep. At the noise he awoke, and found himself face to face with his cousin.

"Is it a dream—a vision?" he cried, pressing his hand to his forehead; "is it indeed Alma I see?"

"It is indeed I, Mario," she replied sadly. "I have come to give you your liberty."

"Liberty!" he cried joyfully; "is it indeed possible?"

"I was the cause, the innocent cause, of your captivity. I come to repair the evil I have done: to set you free, and, at the same time, to bid you farewell for ever."

Her tone was incexpressibly mournful as she said this.

"Farewell for ever!" he cried wildly; "it cannot be. Life to me is worthless on such terms. Without you, Alma, I will not live!"

"Mario," she replied, still in the same mournful tones, "do you wish me to fall a victim to my devotion to you? It is too late for me to draw back. Quick! put on this corslet, this helmet, this doublet; take this musket, and follow me."

"Alma, what mean you? Do I no longer possess your love?"

"You do, Mario. Nevertheless, we must part
for ever—"

"Why? why, Alma?"

"Quick!" said Marina, who, after laying down

the soldier's habiliments at his feet, had placed herself without to watch ; " we have no time to spare ; in ten minutes the guard will be relieved."

" Quick, quick, Mario, if you love me ; if you would not be the cause of my death as well as your own, come."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE FÊTE OF THE BETROTHAL.

" ANSWER my question, Alma. Tell me why you say we must part for ever."

" Mario, dear Mario, waste no more time. I will tell you, before we part—will tell you all ; and God knows how hard it is to bear."

Then, yielding to her entreaties, Mario donned the soldier's habiliments, and, Marina leading, the three went along the passage, and ascended the stone steps.

Marina and Alma parted at the foot of the great staircase.

" Adieu, Mario ! adieu for ever !" said Alma ; " may you be happy ! You know your way to the battlements, and thence to the small wicket ? The password for the night is *Monte Leone* ; but no one will attempt to molest you, if you pass out before the guard is changed. All the soldiers of this watch are bribed. Haste ! Once more, adieu !"

She held out her hand. He seized it, and, drawing her towards him, clasped her in a tight embrace.

"Alma, dear Alma, I cannot leave you thus. Speak ! Tell me why you bid me relinquish you ?"

She allowed him to embrace her for perhaps the space of a minute. Then she tore herself from his arms, and said, in accents touching from their sadness, "Because, Mario, in a fortnight I am to wed the Count of Santa Fioro."

* * * * *

Great was the rage of Hercules Vitelli when he learned the escape of his prisoner. Bitterly he repented not having hanged at once the son of his enemy. But it was too late now, and Mario was free.

Santa Fioro kept his word, and fully acknowledged his complicity in the plot, alleging as his reason that the only way to gain Alma's hand was by liberating her cousin. The count was right when he asserted to Alma that Hercules Vitelli would not care to quarrel with him. Though in a furious rage, he repressed all outward show thereof. There remained only poor Alma, and at times the idea crossed his mind of revenging himself on her ; but his interest was against this, and the gentleness of the poor child was her safeguard. After his impotent fit of rage, his former terrors returned, and he saw clearly that an alliance between his presumed daughter and the powerful Count of Santa Fioro would contribute greatly to his safety ; for, of course, when

allied to him by marriage, the count would feel bound to take arms against the terrible bandit, should he again attack him.

A day was fixed for the betrothal of Santa Fioro and Alma, and a magnificent masked ball was to be given in the palace of Spoleto, in honour of the occasion. The eventful evening came ; all Spoleto was illuminated, and seemed like a city of enchanted palaces. The ball was to commence at ten o'clock ; but long before that hour visitors began to arrive, and crowds gathered in the streets to see the grand equipages drive up to the palace of the prince.

If there was one heart heavier than any other amidst all this gaiety, it was that of Alma. The Count of Santa Fioro was late, and waiting his arrival, she wandered listlessly up and down the illuminated halls and passages of the palace, which already began to be thronged with guests. All at once, two well-known faces appeared suddenly before her eyes : they did not see her, for she was partly in the shade of a pillar ; but the blow of a poniard could scarcely have caused her more pain than she experienced as she recognised Regina, tenderly leaning on the arm of Mario. She stepped on one side, behind the pillar, desiring that they should pass without seeing her ; but instead of doing so, they seated themselves on a low couch at its foot. Mario had for a moment removed his mask, but, seeing some people approach, he quickly replaced it. Alma could not help hearing the conversation

"Certainly, cousin," said Mario, "you have made me commit an action of desperate imprudence, to venture into the palace of the man who, a few days back, held me a prisoner."

"Are you afraid, cousin Mario?" said Regina in slightly mocking tones.

"I am afraid of nothing," he replied; "but you remind me of those nymphs who attract by their charms only to beguile to destruction."

Alma now attempted to leave, hoping to escape without being recognised. Mario suddenly turned pale; he had perceived her. He rose, and, making an excuse to Regina, hurried after her.

"Alma," he said, on reaching her, "since you love me no longer, you see I have come to your betrothal *fête*."

"It is not for you to reproach me," she murmured; "for have you not but this moment left Regina? But of what use talking? as you say, this is the *fête* of my betrothal. All is finished between us." And with these words, she turned, and made her way to the Count of Santa Fioro, who, having just arrived, was seeking her.

Mario remained as though rooted to the spot, his eyes fixed on the ground. Presently he felt a hand laid softly on his shoulder: he turned; it was Regina. She took his arm, and, without a word, led him from the gallery to one of the saloons, a door from which opened into the garden.

As they passed out into the open air, Mario's

heart beat strangely, and he asked himself for what purpose Regina had led him there. Presently she spoke: "Mario, this is the night of Alma's betrothal; let us wish her joy."

Mario only sighed.

Regina watched his sad and mournful countenance, and broke out into a little mocking laugh. "Ha, ha!" she said; "this will be an eventful night."

"Eventful! how?" he asked listlessly.

"Do you not know," she replied, "that to-night your father, Andrea Vitelli, attacks the last remaining castle of the prince?"

"To-night!" replied Mario; "I knew it not; my father told me nothing of it."

"Nevertheless, it is true; and that is not all."

"Not all!" he replied; "what mean you?"

"I mean that, ere morning, this palace will be in flames."

"Impossible!" he cried; "who, then, shall fire it? Andrea Vitelli?"

"No, not Andrea Vitelli. Are there none other than he?"

"What mean you, Regina?"

"What mean I? I mean BEL DEMONIO."

"Ha! Bel Demonio! How know you this? Is it indeed true, or do you but jest?"

"It is no jest, Mario, as the flaming palace of Hercules Vitelli will anon proclaim. Perchance he and Alma will perish in the ruins."

"Alma! never!" he cried passionately. "I will warn her."

"Should you do so," she cried hurriedly, "you are both lost. No person will to-night leave the palace without the knowledge of Bel Demonio; I myself will warn Alma when the time arrives."

"Let us return to the saloons," said Mario, replacing his mask. "The Marquis Campirelli, your gay cavalier, will be seeking you."

"No, let us remain," she said passionately. "A pest on the Marquis Campirelli! I must speak to you, since you will not or cannot divine that which I would say." She was silent for a little time, and then, laying her small hand on his shoulder, said, in dulcet tones, "Mario, will you not love me?" As he made no reply, she continued, in hasty tones: "Mario, I love thee; I have long restrained the transports of that passion which consumes me; but now I can bear it no longer. O Mario, Mario! I love thee!" and thus speaking, Regina approached her lips to his, and threw one arm tenderly round his neck. "Oh, love me," she continued; "a little love for me, Mario! I am at thy feet to obtain thy love. I have disdained all those who have sought mine. Mine is not a love of to-day, ungrateful one! You know how long my heart has burned in secret for thee."

These incoherent words plunged Mario into inexpressible trouble; he wished to stop his cousin, but could not find the words.

"O Mario!" she cried, clinging to him, "is it possible you will not love me?"

"Regina," he said, "listen to me, I implore you."

"Speak," she said; "I am in your power; it is not the Countess Valiero, it is not even the Regina of the mountains, it is only a poor girl who loves you, and weeps!"

But her prayers were in vain; and as by degrees the unwelcome conviction was forced upon her, other feelings arose in her bosom. She lifted her head, which had reposed on his shoulder, and withdrew herself coldly, almost disdainfully. A bitter smile replaced the loving, tender one which had wreathed her mouth, and a fire other than that of love burned in her dark eyes.

"It is enough, Mario," she said, after a pause. "I have spoken, and have been scorned; on your head be it."

"What is it you wish? what would you say?" he asked in surprise.

"I would say," replied Regina bitterly, "that in place of disdainfully repulsing the love I offer you, it would have been more honourable to avow that your love was bestowed on Alma."

"Alma!" exclaimed Mario.

"Yes, Alma!" she cried passionately; "you know you love her."

"You say I love her; what if I do?"

"You avow it, then?"

"Yes, yes, if it so please you, I own to it," replied Mario hotly; "I love Alma, and my heart is too full of her to find room for another."

Regina heard this with lips pressed together; and all colour faded from her face.

"Good!" she said, in a tone of voice which, though low, breathed an intensity of hate. "You say you love her; tell her, then, Mario, if you meet her again this evening, that you have pronounced her death-sentence: to-night she dies!" With these words, Regina gave vent to a peal of mocking laughter, and left him.

Mario, his heart filled with gloomy forebodings, followed, with the intention of seeking Alma and warning her of Regina's threat; but he could not succeed in finding her, nor did he again see Regina.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BEL DEMONIO.

THE night was far advanced. It was dark and murky. Not a star was to be seen in the sky, and most of the lights which had illuminated the town earlier in the evening had gone out.

The *fête* at the Palace Vitelli was approaching its end, and already many guests had departed. The lights in the windows facing the grand entrance had all been suffered to expire; and it was not till

one entered the courtyard of the palace that either much light or gaiety were apparent within.

There were but two entrances to the palace: one by a small wicket; the other, the principal, facing the square.

In the open space in front, at a sufficient distance to be screened from observation, a woman might be seen hovering about, and watching intently all the guests who came out.

"Ah!" murmured the dark woman, for it was she; "both are there, *Regina* and *Alma*; but which? oh, heavens! which? *Regina* fears me, repulses me, almost hates me! *Alma* is gentle as the dove, loving as the gazelle. Both so young, so beautiful!"

She was muttering thus to herself, when a litter, borne by four lackeys, came out from the portal.

She heard the words, "Adieu, Countess Valiero!" and at once knew who was the occupant of the litter.

She drew on one side, and saw it pass her and turn the angle of the square. Still she watched and hovered about, as though wishing to enter the courtyard of the palace, and yet fearing to do so. Presently she heard a dull, rumbling sound, which she soon discovered to be caused by a body of horsemen advancing slowly and cautiously. It was then that, for the first time, she perceived objects moving about in the darkness near the palace. Until the

sound of horse-hoofs was heard, these mysterious ones must have remained not only perfectly silent, but also immovable.

Near the centre of the open space in front, there was a clump of trees and shrubs surrounding a statue of an ancestor of the prince. Hither the dark woman took refuge, as the horsemen slowly approached.

Soon she perceived mounted men, who, advancing more cautiously as they drew near the palace, halted close to where she was concealed, and, at a signal from their leader, dismounted.

Then it was that she perceived that the horsemen, who numbered about thirty, were all blacks, and though they did not wear the white cloaks (probably for the sake of concealment), she knew by the masked figure, their leader, that it was the terrible Bel Demonio and his band.

Several men on foot now came cautiously up, and, one at a time, seemed to be giving information to the leader.

Presently Bel Demonio, having carefully scanned the palace and its approaches, went around his men, as though counting them.

The woman, hid in the shrubs, could see every thing as well as hear, for just then the clouds which obscured the heavens cleared off a little.

Bel Demonio halted, and, speaking to the blacks, said in a low tone :

“ You are all devoted to me!”

"To the death!" answered one and all.

"Good! The hour to prove it has come. You see yonder palace? Well, there are three persons whom I hate,—Hercules Vitelli, Mercedes the duenna, and Alma the betrothed of Santa Fioro. Those three must die!"

The blacks inclined their heads in token of assent, a guttural sound issuing from their throats.

Bel Demonio continued :

"My arrangements are all made. A hundred and fifty of Campirelli's men are in and around the palace. In an hour's time, flames will break forth. Before then, most of the guests will have left. The great entrance will be blocked up. Six of you, leaving your horses here, will station yourselves by the small gate which opens to the south. A veranda, supported by stone pillars, covers this: conceal yourselves behind those pillars, and watch. Two women will pass out that way. The first will be Regina Vitelli—you will let her pass; the second, Alma—you will kill her without fail. Do you understand?"

Again all the blacks bowed their heads.

"Now to your posts; six to the veranda, the rest to watch and wait for orders."

Then they all went to their posts, and Bel Demonio disappeared in another direction.

All this time the woman, crouched among the little trees, scarce dared to breathe for fear and trembling.

"Oh, that voice!" she muttered, as she emerged; "oh, that voice of Bel Demonio! so soft, so cruel! Is it a bad spirit, sent by Heaven to punish Hercules for his crimes? But surely Heaven would not include Alma, so good, so innocent, in the doom of the prince!"

While the mysterious woman was thus communing with herself, she again saw a litter approach, and, as it passed close to her, she recognised Regina. She watched the litter till it disappeared within the gates of the palace, and then herself took the same direction, and, apparently gathering courage, boldly entered the courtyard.

Regina had already passed in and dismissed the litter-bearers. She made her way through various galleries and corridors, till she reached a small retiring-room, which faced the south. A few lamps burned here and there; but all the glory of the *fête* had departed. One or two guests still lingered, and the servants—many of them overcome from drinking the wine their masters had left—lay about asleep among the disordered furniture, the effects of the night's revels.

Pieces of dress, masks, lace, and faded bouquets strewed the floor, and all looked wretched and dreary. The retiring-chamber into which Regina went had only one entrance, with a window which looked out on to the open space in front of the palace. Alma, worn out by the fatigues of the night, lay asleep on an ottoman, and started up as Regina entered.

"Regina!" she cried; "O dear sister, I thought you had gone! I am so weary."

She threw her arms around her cousin's neck with such genuine tenderness that Regina, *malgré* her jealousy, felt her heart soften; but she stifled her feelings, and, going to the window, produced a small whistle, and sounded it three times.

"What are you doing, Regina?" asked Alma in surprise.

"Nothing, Alma; at least, I only sounded my whistle as a signal to my litter-bearers; for I, too, am weary."

"Come, rest yourself, Regina."

Regina accepted the invitation, and reclined on the couch by the side of Alma. Soon the warmth of the room and fatigue caused her eyes to grow heavy, and in a few minutes the two girls were sleeping side by side.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CATASTROPHE.

THEY had not thus lain long, when a subtle vapour seemed to be penetrating the whole palace. The open door of the chamber looked out into a passage with many windows, and through these a flickering red glare, faint at first, might have been seen. Then succeeded a slight rumbling, followed by puffs

of smoke, which the wind blew about among the passages of the palace.

Still all slept and were ignorant, and the fire slowly and steadily gained ground.

The dark woman, after having long and vainly sought Alma through all the saloons, at last wandered into the little room where the two girls lay.

They were alone together, and Alma's arm fell over Regina's shoulder.

The dark woman gazed at the two long and steadily.

"Both so young, so beautiful!" she murmured; "but which? oh, heavens! which?"

And now the smouldering flames blazed up almost suddenly, a crackling and roaring sound was plainly heard, and blasts of hot air and smoke careered along the spacious corridors and staircases.

"Fire! fire!" is the cry.

The palace of Hercules Vitelli is in flames!

Although the crackling of the flames, and the cries of fire from the aroused household, now resounded all over the palace, neither of the girls awoke.

"My God, my God!" cried the dark woman, who stood regarding them with clasped hands; "guide and direct me! Which shall I save? I cannot both. I heard the terrible Bel Demonio give orders that the first young girl who passed out by the wicket should be allowed to go free, the second

should be assassinated. O Heaven ! have mercy on me, and—”

At that moment Alma awoke, and her eyes fell upon the dark woman, whose face was pale with anxiety and terror, and streaming with tears.

“ Ah, poor mother !” she murmured, still half-asleep, “ is that you ?”

“ Mother ! Great Heaven ! she calls me mother,” she muttered, trembling with emotion ; “ the All-Wise has heard my prayer.”

She then seized the young girl by the arm, for she had again fallen off to sleep.

“ Alma !—Alma !—child—come with me. I wish to speak to you. Come, come ; do not awaken Regina. Quick !”

Alma, confused, but half-awake, and wondering, arose, and suffered herself to be led from the room.

“ Ah !” she cried, as the glare and crackling of the flames, the cries and tumult, burst upon her senses, “ what is this ?”

“ The palace is on fire ! Come with me—quick ! See, already the smoke is penetrating the corridor.”

But Alma stood immovable.

“ Regina ! where is Regina ? I will not come without Regina.”

“ Come, come, foolish girl ; I will return for Regina. Haste ; or both you, she, and I shall perish.”

“ No, no !” she cried passionately ; “ I will not leave Regina, my sister.”

"Alma, for Heaven's sake, hear me. One only can be saved at a time. Haste! Regina will follow."

Alma suffered herself to be led away, trembling, and unwilling to leave her cousin. As they advanced along the corridor, the smoke grew denser, hotter, and more acrid; the blaze of the flame fiercer, the shouts and cries louder. Having reached the grand staircase, the dark woman dragged Alma down into the vestibule leading into the courtyard. Now the roar of the flames grew terrible, and mingled with it was the crashing of glass, the noise of falling timbers, and the cries of the terrified household. But above all these rang out fierce yells and shouts, and, mingled with them, the words "BEL DEMONIO!" ascended to heaven.

"BEL DEMONIO! BEL DEMONIO!" resounded on all hands. The flames roared and crackled, but could not drown that fierce cry, which told that this conflagration was the work of that terrible and mysterious being. As they ran across the courtyard, the dark woman glanced at the great gate, and saw that it was barricaded; she remembered the words which she had overheard Bel Demonio utter to his band, and shuddered.

"The wicket, the wicket!" she cried; "where is the small wicket? You know the way, Alma—quick! or we shall be swallowed up in the flames."

"Yonder, yonder!" cried Alma, almost fainting with terror at the awful scene which surrounded her,

pointing to a passage leading from the southern side of the quadrangle.

She almost carried Alma thither through the smoke, which was now hot and suffocating; the passage was quickly threaded, and they stood before the small portal. The gate was closed, but fortunately not locked, and in a moment she had unfastened it, and thrown it open; a blast of cold air rushed in, and in the open space she could see a great crowd of people, who had been gathered together by the flames. The thought struck her suddenly: "There are two of us; Bel Demonio's men have orders to kill the second girl who passes out. Alma shall go first, perchance they will kill me; no matter."

Then she pushed Alma forward.

"Go, dear child; thank God, you are saved."

Alma, terror-stricken, passed out with faltering steps; a slight shriek burst from her lips, for suddenly she saw on each side of her three huge black men, draped in white cloaks.

"Go on, go on!" cried the dark woman, "you are safe."

Alma obeyed, and the dark woman followed a few paces behind. Suddenly the three black men on either side started forward, brandishing their heavy scimitars. No word escaped their lips.

"Hold, hold!" cried the dark woman; "this is the lady Regina, and I am her serving-maid."

Then they all fell back to their places behind the

pillars, slowly, solemnly, like spirits of another world ; and the glittering sabres, that a moment since waved threateningly, were lowered, and they stood, as before, silent, motionless as statues.

“ Saved, saved ! ” she cried hysterically ; and, clasping Alma in her arms, she covered her with kisses. “ My daughter, my daughter ! ”

The young girl, overcome by terror and excitement, sank fainting, and would have fallen but for the other’s supporting arm.

The dark woman drew her to a little distance from the burning pile, and, letting her lie on the ground, tenderly supported her head in her lap, and endeavoured to recover her from the swoon into which she had fallen.

Fiercer and fiercer blazed the flame ; louder and louder grew its roaring and crackling ; the heavens around were lurid with the glare ; while huge volumes of smoke rendered yet blacker the canopy of night.

* * * * *

Regina awoke immediately after Alma had left.

“ Alma, Alma ! where are you ? ” looking around for her intended victim. No one replied. She ran to the window, and looked out. The whole town was illumined by the light of the burning pile. She became terribly pale ; and, gathering her cloak around her, hurried from the room. Along the corridor and down the stairs she flew with the speed of wind, half-stifled and blinded by the acrid smoke.

"I am yet in time," she cried, as she ran across the courtyard ; "my vengeance is complete."

Suddenly she heard a terrible cry, and casting her eyes to the right, she saw, standing on the threshold of the banqueting-hall, Prince Vitelli and the old duenna Mereedes.

"Ha, ha!" she cried fiercely ; "my enemies, you shall die ! my vengeance is complete ! *Viva Bel Demonio !*"

Her eyes blazing in the light of the flames, her hair dishevelled, she stood with form erect and head thrown back, gazing with wild triumph on the terrible scene : an avenging fury she seemed ; a spirit of evil gloating over her work.

The old man and woman both recognised her at once.

"My daughter ! oh, my daughter !" he cried, approaching her with tottering steps ; "I have regained you. Let us fly—there is time ; let my palace perish ; for have I not recovered my daughter ?"

"There is time," said Regina, slowly retreating towards the passage which led to the wicket ; "there is time, but not for thee, mine enemy. Thou and thy daughter shall perish together.

"Regina, Regina !" the old man cried pitifully, still tottering towards her ; "hear me, oh, hear me ! Thou art my daughter, and God has given thee back to my old age !"

Regina laughed scornfully.

"Back, dotard !" she said, pointing a pistol to

his breast ; “back ! or I rob the flames of their prey.”

The wretched old man fell on his knees.

“ My God, my God ! my daughter, my daughter !”

Again she laughed a fierce, fiendish laugh.

“ Satan is thy God, old fool ! I am thine enemy ; and thou and thy daughter Alma shall die.”

All this while she kept retreating, till she had gained the entrance to the passage. The noise of the roaring flames, the crash of the falling buildings, was now terrific, and almost drowned her words. A huge burning piece of roof fell between her and the old man and Mercedes. She was safe ; they were doomed : a gulf of fire was between them.

A shriek of mortal terror burst from the old man’s lips, answered by a cry of triumph from hers.

“ Perish, Hercules Vitelli, thou and thy daughter Alma !”

“ Regina, Regina ! save me ! Thou wilt not let thy father perish ! Oh, my daughter !” he yelled, in mortal agony.

A mocking laugh was her sole reply.

The next moment, with a fearful crash, the blazing roof fell inwards, and buried Hercules Vitelli and the duenna beneath its fiery ruins.

Regina turned and fled before the myriads of sparks, the hot blasts, and the blinding smoke which swept through the passage. In a moment she had gained the wicket. She paused.

"Safe!" she cried exultingly; "and my vengeance is complete."

Then, gathering her cloak around her, she passed through the portal into the open air. Scarcely had she done so, than with one accord the six blacks started forward: they had kept their posts, though their clothes were scorched by the intense heat; with uplifted scimitars, they threw themselves upon her.

"Hold! hold!" she shrieked. "Hold your hands! I AM BEL DEMONIO!"

Too late; the loud roaring of the flames and the crash of the falling palace drowned her voice. Six swords pierced her at the same moment, and with one wild cry she fell.

CONCLUSION.

AMONG the crowd outside who witnessed the final crash of the blazing palace were Andrea Vitelli, his son Mario, and a large number of his men.

After having stormed the prince's last castle on the plain, they had seen the flames of his palace, and hurried to the spot.

"This is the work of Bel Demonio," muttered Andrca. "A curse on the fellow for having fore-stalled my vengeance! Ha!" he suddenly exclaimed; "my poor little Alma is in the palace! If aught befall her, my vengeance shall overtake the man who did it!"

The same thought had occurred to Mario, and both now spurred on their horses towards the town, followed by the band.

They arrived in time to see the catastrophe—the murder of Regina, and the final fall of the blazing ruins.

The Count Santa Fioro was there, with a large body of his men, as were many other nobles of the neighbourhood. But though many witnessed the tragic death of Regina, the perpetrators for the time escaped. In a moment afterwards, the fall of the ruins raised a prodigious cloud of smoke, under cover of which they vanished, none knew whither. The body of Regina was removed, and then it was discovered that beneath her cloak and dress she wore a man's costume—the black velvet dress of Bel Demonio. The white cloak and mask, too, were found rolled up together in a small bag she carried slung over her shoulder.

The mystery was solved. Regina Vitelli was the terrible being who had so long struck terror into the hearts of all.

Alma, so soon as she saw Andrea Vitelli, hastened and threw herself into his arms.

“Safe, safe! my sweet dove!” the fierce outlaw said, smoothing her fair cheek. “Heaven be praised, Alma!”

She disengaged herself from her uncle's embrace, and saw standing beside her the Count of Santa Fioro.

She remembered her vow, and shuddered.

"Alma, you are safe. I come to claim you. I have the right."

Mario Vitelli strode between them.

"It is a lie, Count of Santa Fioro!"

The count grew white with rage, but restrained himself, and said :

"Alma, I claim you by virtue of your vow. Speak ; have I not the right?"

A terrible struggle raged in her bosom, but she answered in a low tone :

"You have, Count of Santa Fioro. I will wed you."

"Ha ! is it so?" exclaimed Andrea ; "and yet, methinks, sweet one, thou seemest unwilling. Hast sworn to wed this man?"

"I have."

"And wilt keep thy oath?"

"I will, please Heaven, if he claim me."

"That shall he never do!" cried Mario fiercely, drawing his sword.

The count turned round to his men.

"Seize me this ruffian!" he said. "'Tis but a short time back I freed him from a dungeon. This is the hound's gratitude!"

A dozen of the count's soldiers advanced to carry out this order.

"Stand back!" shouted Andrea Vitelli. "Forward, men ! seize me the Count Santa Fioro!"

But the count fell back towards his soldiers.

These pressed to the support of their lord, and soon the force of Santa Fioro and Andrea Vitelli were face to face, separated only by a few yards. The astonished people of Spoleto stood by, aghast at the idea of a pitched battle in the town.

"A Vitelli! a Vitelli!" shouted Andrea, mounting his horse. "Who is for Andrea Vitelli?"

"I!—and I!—and I!" rang out from many throats; for the bandit had many friends, but few enemies, save Hercules Vitelli and his retainers.

His force, thus augmented, exceeded the other in number.

Santa Fioro's soldiers began to waver. They did not care to engage with the terrible bandit at any thing like equal odds.

"Count Santa Fioro, do you claim this lady's hand?" shouted Andrea, addressing him.

"I do. She has sworn. I demand the fulfilment of her oath!"

"And I will compel you, at the sword's point, to free her!" cried Mario, advancing into the open space between the rival bands. "Come forth, Sir Count!"

"Ay, come forth," echoed Andrea, "and let the sword decide."

The count replied not.

"You refuse? Forward, men! seize him! A Vitelli! a Vitelli!"

Then, shouting the well-known war-cry, he and his men charged forward, and, in a twinkling, drove

before them the panic-stricken soldiers of the count.

Mario Vitelli himself singled out the count, and fiercely attacked him. The combat was short. Both were on foot, and from the first Santa Fioro, unused to warfare, had no chance with the young and powerful mountaineer. His sword flew from his hand, and a cut on the head forced him to his knees. Mario's sword was quickly at his throat.

"Yield your claim to the lady Alma, or die!"

The touch of the cold blade at his throat, and the menacing looks of Mario, told the count it was no time for trifling ; so, with a very ill grace, he muttered :

"I yield; the day is yours. It is the fortune of war."

While this had been going on, Andrea Vitelli had questioned Alma as to her escape ; and, having been informed it was due to the "dark woman," had ordered her to be brought before him.

She was not to be found. After a time, however, she was discovered endeavouring to leave the crowd unobserved, and, notwithstanding her entreaties to the contrary, brought before the chief.

She stood pale and trembling, with downcast eyes. Andrea regarded her intently. Slowly an expression of uncertainty, of wonder, came over his features.

"Can it be?" he muttered ; "or is it but a wild phantasy? Can the dead again walk the earth, to remind the living of their crimes?"

" Speak, woman !" he cried in a terrible voice.
" Who art thou ? Thy face seems familiar to me."

She fell on her knees before him.

" Mercy, brother, mercy !"

" Lucrecia !" he cried ; " Lucrecia, my sister ! Not dead ! Now, Heaven be praised ; for I have been spared a great crime."

Then he raised the kneeling form of the weeping woman, and pressed her in his arms.

" Lucrecia," he said, " how is it you are alive, and why did you not reveal yourself to me, your brother, who have never ceased to lament the hasty cruelty which bid you die ?"

" I threw myself from the window into the river, as you saw," she said, " and became insensible. Some persons passing, hearing the splash, rescued and recovered me. For all these long years I have been a wanderer on the face of the earth, fearing to reveal myself to you, lest you should again condemn me to die. My only comfort—my sole thought—was my daughter. I knew not for certain which was she ; but now, this day, Heaven has revealed her to me, and restored her. I have been the instrument of saving her."

" Alma your child ? I thought it had been Regina !"

" Regina has perished. In her jealous rage she would have destroyed Alma, but the blow has fallen upon herself."

Mario, with Alma on his arm, now approached, and knelt before the chief, to ask his blessing.

Andrea willingly gave it, and then he again mounted his horse, and ordered his trumpeter to blow a loud blast.

“People of Spoleto!” he cried in a loud voice, rising in his stirrups, so that his tall form could be seen above all those surrounding him; “Hercules Vitelli, usurper and tyrant, has perished; his palace is in ruins,—a fit reward for his crimes. I, Andrea Vitelli, now proclaim myself Count of Spoleto, and Prince of Monte Leone. Who dare say me nay?”

Then there arose a shout, which echoed over the town, and spread to its most remote corners: “*Viva Andrea Vitelli, Prince of Monte Leone!*”

Meanwhile the body of Regina had lain uncared for, unnoticed, save by one; for, faithful even to death, the Marquis Cameriere had long knelt by her side, gazing despairingly in the face of the beautiful fiend—beautiful even in death. Then he had her carefully covered up, laid on a litter, and conveyed to his palace. The bearers, with their sad burden, made their way through the crowd, followed by the marquis, just as the shouts rang loudest:

“*Viva Andrea Vitelli, Prince of Monte Leone!*”

* * * * *

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